NABOKOV'S BODIES

DESCRIPTION AND CHARACTERIZATION IN HIS NOVELS

THESIS

presented to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Zurich
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

RUDOLF WEILER

of Winterthur

Accepted by the Faculty of Arts on the Recommendation
of Professor Max Nänny Ph.D.

Keller AG, Buchdruck + Offset, Aarau
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All art is at once surface and symbol.
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.
It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

(Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

Looking at it objectively, I have never seen a more lucid,
more lonely, better balanced mad mind than mine.

(Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*)

PREFACE

For several reasons, this study has to rely on different editions, as there is no complete edition of Nabokov's works available so far. I have used the American hardcover editions where this was possible, or then the English paperbacks of the Penguin series. A certain inconsistency of spelling was therefore inevitable in the quotations.

For the main theme of this book, as well as for moral and spiritual support, I am deeply indebted to Prof. Roger Kempf. Warmest thanks are equally due to Prof. Max Nänny for his confidence, encouragement, and guidance. The lectures of both were an initiation to the joys of close reading. I am further indebted to Prof. Straumann, Prof. Leisi, and Prof. Petter.

I am deeply grateful to Cathy McLaughlin, Kevin Pardoe, David N. Roscoe, and the O'Sullivans for reading and correcting my manuscripts. Finally, I should like to express my gratitude to my wife; without her assistance this study would have been an impossible undertaking.

Richterswil, November 1975 R. W.

INTRODUCTION

The Author and his Work

Nabokov's interests are almost impossibly wide, he has not only created a vast body of literary works, but he has also composed a large number of difficult chess-problems, and has discovered and described a new species of lepidoptera.[1] These preoccupations have interacted in many ways and thus singularly heightened the appeal of his narrative art. Nabokov unites insights into several cultural backgrounds into a homogeneous whole that knows no barriers (even time, space, and languages are subject to playful manipulations). There must be many influences affecting this cosmopolitan author, but they are cleverly concealed, parodied, and hardly ever admitted.

Poetry, the short story, the drama, and the novel are the genres which Nabokov explored successfully in turn. The novel, showing the greatest variety and consistency, is the object of this study. Literary criticism[2] and translation (of his own and other works) are further activities taken into consideration here.

Nabokov's novels reflect much of the author's philosophy, but not always in a straightforward way. His memory of a perfect childhood and his longing for his remote country became a very powerful dimension in his fiction. Some 'treasured items' of this past were even passed on to the characters in his novels.[3] It is, no doubt, this disposition that led to Nabokov's deep thoughts about space and time.

Nabokov called himself an 'indivisible monist'[4]; he is ill at ease in crowds and disputes the value of group activities. This is shown clearly in the choice of his three main interests in life: he considers literature to be essentially the achievement of one man (trends or schools just do not

[1] *Plebejus (Lysandra) Cormion* Nabokov.

[2] Nabokov studied above all the works of Pushkin and Gogol.

[3] Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 75. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Speak, Memory*.

[4] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 85. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Strong Opinions*.

exist for him); the hunting of lepidoptera is another solitary passion, and so is the *composition* of chess-problems which Nabokov prefers to the *playing* of chess. This is, of course, not an attempt to pigeonhole the author; he has found methods to prevent this and even the most acute critics have not found an attack against this defence.

Discussing Nabokov's novels superficially, one would have to mention the great importance of his elaborate style (in both his Russian and English works), his use of the hybrid form of prose-poetry, rhythm and assonance, his technique of the 'mot juste', which some critics see as verbosity, and his astonishing abundance of metaphors and ellipses.

The problem of 'realism' in Nabokov's work is difficult; and as in all such cases, I would like to draw attention to Nabokov's definitions and statements. He called a 'realistic work of fiction' one 'wherein the author is ready to name or describe without fear of traditional restriction any physical or moral detail pertaining to the world he perceives'.[5] If we apply this definition to his own work, Nabokov would have to be called a 'realistic writer'. He used it, however, in a discussion of some concepts of the nineteenth century and he has, moreover, affirmed several times that there is no 'realism' in his own writings. This is, however, questionable if we take 'realism' to mean 'fidelity of representation' or 'rendering the precise details'[6], of which there is a good deal in Nabokov's works, especially when he creates fictional characters. Yet the author's approach to novel-writing and some of his devices are clearly not 'realistic'[7].

There remain two elements of primary importance that must be mentioned here briefly: Nabokov's ingenious humour and his delight in parody in every form; both are authorial ingredients that lend themselves well to a playful codification of the work.[8] Humour is one of the most intimate areas of personality and can either be of an appealing or repellent quality to others. Puns, word-play, the use of unexpected words, weird anecdotes,

[5] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin,* (by A. Pushkin) translated and commented by V. V. Nabokov, (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series 72, 1964), vol. iii, p. 33. All references will be to this edition.—In an interview Nabokov defined 'reality' thus: 'Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization.' (*Strong Opinions,* p. 10).

[6] *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary,* p. 1666.

[7] Nabokov is not a 'realistic writer' because he consciously works at the destruction of the illusion of 'realism' in his fiction.

[8] An element of play is very often apparent in 'subcurrents of meaning'. This is what I call 'codification' here.

slapstick comedy, and elements bordering on the absurd, are basic to Nabokov's art, as well as a touch of eccentricity and aloofness.

The Theme of the 'Body'

This study was prompted by a delight in Nabokov's humour, his brilliant style, his meticulousness and consistency in the writer's art, and an ingeniousness that is impossible to describe.

The choice of a title for this book proved somewhat difficult. To my mind, the theme that brings together the most interesting possibilities when discussing Nabokov, is the author's perspective in the creation of his fictional characters.[9] This is a system that gives a certain unity to various minor themes related to the body. All these manifestations play an important part in Nabokov's fiction and have often been seen in opposition to his ideas about art, imagination, and description of nature. But the author himself seems to oppose a division of this sort, he sees body and soul as a unity.[10] The idea that the descriptions of bodies and nature have to sustain a '*semblance of realism*', whereas the occupation with art and imagination tends more easily to '*surrealistic effects*', lies close at hand. However, as the whole novel is art, creation, and deception, the bodies living in it are also naturally subject to the laws of these domains. The characters can be homunculi, dummies, or puppets of the author, taken up and relinquished in the course of the novel. This does not exclude the fact that the author tries to endow his creatures with as much life as possible (which makes the reader-spectator forget the strings on which they are dangled or the automatons which move them). They are given a body, movement, accessories, human passions and emotions, houses to live in, and whole societies that crowd around them. The discussion as to whether all this is real, life-like, or totally imagined, is of secondary importance. It is more interesting to see *how* a character comes to life, how he thrives in this artificial world, and what end is in store for him. The polarity and clashes between the two aspects which I

[9] The 'body' I see with R. Kempf as 'a being made of flesh that does not preexist in any form before the novel'. ('Par corps romanesque j'entends des êtres de chair qui ne préexistent aucunement au livre.' R. Kempf, *Sur le corps romanesque*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968, p. 5.)

[10] *TIME Magazine*, (23 May, 1969), p. 51.

have called 'semblance of realism' and 'surrealism' are a typical feature of Nabokov's style. He seems to be highly conscious of this duality and stresses it, one element enhancing the effect of the other. The product of this interaction can, of course, not be called 'realism'.

The theme of the body is not a new one. The nineteenth century produced several works which clearly stress the physical side of a character. There are, for instance, Balzac's *Théorie de la démarche* and some of Gogol's short stories.[11] Balzac's study was probably one of the first of its kind, describing bodies in motion, gestures, and facial expressions, and then trying to provide a system by which the character of a person could be guessed from his appearance. In his stories, Gogol took his themes from the same area. He put parts of bodies and garments to unprecedented uses: a nose, an overcoat became the main subjects for, or even the protagonists in, a piece of fiction, which was certainly a daring invention at the time. The description of these parts is as detailed as if they were characters. Gogol's synecdochic approach led to completely new devices and effects. A confessed admirer of Gogol, Andrei Bely and his *St. Petersburg*[12], may be seen as a link between this tradition and Nabokov. Bely, Joyce, and Proust are among the few authors whom Nabokov ranks highly.

In Nabokov's fiction this technique plays a slightly less obtrusive role. It ist used more discreetly, often in the form of leitmotivs. Yet everything that concerns the body can have great significance for an understanding of the novel, and the author shows a constant awareness with regard to this problem.[13]

[11] Honoré de Balzac, *Oeuvres Complètes,* tome II (Oeuvres Diverses, 1830–35), Paris: Louis Conard, 1928, pp. 613–643. Nikolai Gogol, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories,* R. Wilks transl. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

[12] Published at Berlin in 1922, a short time before Nabokov decided to live there.

[13] Nabokov devoted a great deal of space to the investigation of the body in his study of Gogol and in many other works, as we shall see.

As far as I can see, the critics dealing with Nabokov have hitherto almost totally neglected the aspect of the body as we have defined it.[14] My aim is to redress the balance and to try to fill the gap somewhat, although it was impossible to discuss the theme exhaustively.

How does one investigate a literary universe? There are two possibilities: working from the inside and adopting the author's own principles, or bringing in a concept from the outside. The method pursued here tries to accept and appropriate Nabokov's ideas of literary criticism.[15] I have abstained from discussing abstract ideas connected with the body and have preferred to describe it directly, not evading the small details of its manifestations, often leaving the conclusions to the reader, as Nabokov usually does himself, and trying to show the astonishing variety and consistency of Nabokov's work in a new way. To illustrate this, episodes, scenes, and examples were chosen from hosts of similar ones, where the treatment seemed most typical and original.

Nabokov's style and his attitudes make it difficult for the critics to find a foothold. I have tried to adhere to the author's text as often as possible by means of quotations, even if they are sometimes lengthy. Thus I hope to preserve something of the spirit of the details on which I have concentrated particularly, assuming that my readers will have read (and perhaps even re-read) Nabokov's works. Therefore, I have decided against providing summaries of whole books, which, in our case, would be point-

[14] The best understanding of Nabokov's total achievement is no doubt accomplished by bi-lingual critics. The most complete and readable study is Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art,* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967). But here, as in most studies on Nabokov, the focus is on the art in his works, and is therefore not corresponding to my own.—William W. Rowe's *Nabokov's Deceptive World,* (New York: New York UP, 1971), contains valuable contributions to a better comprehension of some patterns underlying Nabokov's (English) language in its first two parts. Part III ('Sexual Manipulations') is, however, a good example of the type of criticism that is impracticable if one chooses to respect the comments that Nabokov made on this subject. Explaining literature in this way is banal and destroys the total effect of a work of art.—Two other works make an unnecessary distinction between Nabokov's Russian and English productions; both concentrate on his English novels: Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels,* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: California UP, 1972), which has a remarkably good introduction, and Page Stegner, *Escape into Esthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov,* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967).

[15] See below: 'Nabokovian Criticism'.

less. Instead, I have supplied backgrounds and sketches of scenes to put my discussion into perspective.

In an interview Nabokov once provided an 'ABC for critics' which should be discussed here, as I have observed it as far as possible:

> 'My advice to a budding literary critic would be as follows: learn to distinguish banality. Remember that mediocrity thrives on "ideas". Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories. By all means place the "how" above the "what" but do not let it be confused with the "so what". Rely on the sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs. Do not drag in Freud at this point. All the rest depends on personal talent.'[16]

This is a list of Nabokov's *bêtes noires:* abstract ideas, symbols, allegories, and Freudian psychology. The only constructive piece of advice stresses the fact that style is more important than content. Thus it seems legitimate to concentrate on the author's methods in description and characterization.

Part One may be seen as a section of basic preliminaries, a taking of bearing which is not directly linked with the following chapters. The first two chapters deal with the most obvious authorial devices: the author's direct contact with his reader to educate him according to his own principles. This is followed by a discussion of typical Nabokovian techniques such as parody, didacticism, and rhetorics. These two chapters contain many instances of Nabokov's methods of destroying the illusion of 'realism'. 'Nabokovian Criticism' should give an idea of some methods that the author himself employed in his literary criticism; and 'Recurrencies' is a collection of different forms of repetitions.

In Part Two I have been concerned with the characters' bodies in a direct way, with their description and characterization.

In Part Three some more indirect manifestations of the body have been studied: clothes, hygiene, and food.

Parts Two and Three contain a survey of Nabokov's works in the light of the characteristics mentioned above. I did not take into account Nabokov's short stories, although they sometimes stress corporal matters strongly. The revelation of certain connections between the body and its requisites shows that the author has full control even of these trivial subjects, to which other writers hardly give a thought, or which they leave to chance.

[16] *Strong Opinions,* p. 66.

PART ONE

'SIGNPOSTS AND TOMBSTONES'

'Reality is a mask'
(V. Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*)

1. Ideal and Scandalous Readers

'In a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world.'[1]

Nabokov seems to have two kinds of readers, himself and a few kindred souls, and the rest of the world. He has also frequently proclaimed that he writes for a far-off posterity. His main reason for writing (as has often been said) is his loss of his cherished Russian past and language. His work is the unprecedented and almost impossible attempt to recreate what it felt like to be a privileged Russian child and youth before the Soviet Revolution, and how life as a self-centred émigré became possible in his exile.

What kind of a reader does he expect? His ideal reader would be a Russian, and because this is almost impossible ('the Ivan Ivanovich and Lev Osipovich of 1930 have long been replaced by non-Russian readers who are puzzled and irritated today having to imagine a society they know nothing about'[2]), at least an intelligent and penetrating, but unobtrusive one.

In an interview the author made the following sweeping statement: 'I don't think that an artist should bother about his audience. His best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning. I think that the audience that an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask.'[3] These are very cryptic remarks and neatly sum up attitudes that Nabokov likes to take: detachment, private jokes, and complete disregard for the traditional reader's likings.

Nabokov did not only recreate lost time and emotion in his novels, but he also looked for a soil for his work to grow in. Russia was out of the question[4]; the exile in Europe became unbearable as well. Nabokov

[1] *Speak, Memory,* p. 223.

[2] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *The Eye,* (London: Panther Books, 1968), p. 8. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *The Eye.*

[3] *Strong Opinions,* p. 18.

[4] Compare *Strong Opinions* (pp. 9–10): 'All the Russia I need, after all, is always with me; literature, language and my own Russian childhood. I will never return.'

continued the westward movement and emigrated to the United States in 1940[5], and at last a real audience began to materialize and even crowd around the author after the success of *Lolita*. Nabokov commented thus on his new homeland: 'In America I'm happier than in any other country. It is in America that I found my best readers, minds that are closest to mine. I feel intellectually at home in America. It is a second home in the true sense of the word.'[6]

But let us return to the émigré-public which was evidently limited in numbers and, therefore, fatefully restricted the possibilities of the artist. Nabokov commented upon his situation in an interview: 'I don't think my Russian writings ever brought me more than a few hundred dollars per year, and I am all for the ivory tower, and for writing to please one reader alone—one's own self. But one also needs some reverberation, if not response, and a moderate multiplication of one's self throughout a country or countries; and if there be nothing but a void around one's desk, one would expect it to be at least a sonorous void, and not circumscribed by the walls of a padded cell.'[7] This craving for recognition must have been very strong, but Nabokov had to wait for about forty years for the breakthrough of *Lolita*. The small number of early readers, mostly émigrés themselves, had the benefit of being introduced to the colourful, unconventional, and revolutionary universe of Nabokov's work from the start, the others did not matter.

Few authors have been so strict and even pitiless about the way in which their works should be read and (not) interpreted, so particular about the requirements and faults of the readers, and even more of critics. His is a profession that Nabokov finds problematical: 'The possibility of venting or distilling friendly or unfriendly feelings through the medium of literary criticism is what makes that art such a skewy one.'[8] Nabokov is probably the only writer who boasts of never having thanked a critic for a good review.

Yet in Nabokov's 'hierarchy of readers' there is even a category below the average critic: the reader applying Freudian psychology when reading

[5] This was also the moment when Nabokov decided to become an American writer, writing in English from then on.

[6] *Strong Opinions*, p. 10.

[7] *Strong Opinions*, p. 37.

[8] *Strong Opinions*, p. 39.

novels. No group of readers has ever been treated as harshly as they.[9] It is no wonder that Nabokov's writings should generate or attract a special kind of readers, while automatically keeping away others. Nina Berberova affirms that a new type of reader is necessary for an understanding of Nabokov's works: 'Nabokov does not only write in a new manner, we learn from him to read in a new way as well. He (like some others) creates a new reader. He has taught us not to identify with heroes as did our ancestors, but with the author himself, in whatever disguise he may hide from us, in whatever mask he may appear.'[10]

What is the lesson which we are supposed to learn before or while reading Nabokov? The following statements from narrators scattered throughout his work may help to establish the image and desired abilities of this 'new reader'. One point has already been made: that he should be careful with whom he identifies; the first possibility is not always the best or only one. He should be careful in many ways, because the requirements are manifold. The readers can be grouped into four categories: the scandalous readers become downright enemies and are constantly abused; the good-natured fool is easily led astray and ridiculed, and only the artistic reader and companion soul of the author finds mercy and even benevolence. The best readers (such as Ada and Van) seek artistic excitement in books.[11]

The narrator in *Despair* clearly defines his attitude to the reader ('whom I pet and pamper like a devoted nurse'[12]), and demands that he should be able to follow the clues which form a network of 'underground meaning'. The careless reader is fooled and called names (rogue,

[9] Parodies of the concepts of Freudian psychology are countless in Nabokov's work, as well as apostrophes to what he calls 'the members of the Viennese delegation' (*Mary,* Preface), or the 'disciples of the Viennese witch-doctor' (*Invitation to a Beheading,* Preface).

[10] Nina Berberova, 'Nabokov in the Thirties', *TriQuarterly* 17, (Evanston: Northwestern University, Winter 1970), p. 228. This is a festschrift for Nabokov's seventieth birthday, including many excellent articles and photographs.

[11] 'Both sought excitement in books as the best readers always do; both found in many renowned works pretentiousness, tedium and facile misinformation.' (Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle,* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 107. I prefer this edition to the hardbound American one, as it includes Nabokov's farcical 'Notes to Ada' as an appendix. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Ada.*

[12] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Despair,* (London: Panther Books, 1969), p. 76. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Despair.*

fool, swine, etc.) and he belongs to the 'comatose mass of amorphous readerdom' as it is called in *Bend Sinister*.[13]

Even 'non-readers', that is people who discuss a book without having read it, are mentioned in an interview.[14] Very often a 'serious reader' is evoked and it is not always quite clear on which side he is to stand. In *Speak, Memory* there is a small chapter (III, 5) which is 'not for the general reader, but for the particular idiot who, because he lost a fortune in some crash, thinks he understands me.'[15] This is a chapter for idiots therefore, which the others are asked to skip and, incidentally, a good example of Nabokov's way of anticipating the reader's reactions and trying to stimulate or prevent them. The end of the chapter states laconically: 'The general reader may now resume.'

In *Ada* a coded message is exchanged between the lovers, and the lazy reader of novels (in this case unwilling to decipher the code) is given rough treatment by the author: 'With a little more attention and a little less antipathy the simplest-minded reader will, one trusts, understand that business.'[16] The reader is asked to participate further by answering 'Questions for study and discussion'.[17] This proves that the solving of puzzles and riddles is a basic activity when reading Nabokov's novels.

The author's attempt to form conscious, sympathetic readers is the didactic element in his fiction: his audience is meant to share in the raptures of the original creation and to make an effort at re-creation. Thus, the reader is often asked to imagine a detail on his own. This device is used by the narrators in *Despair* and *Lolita*[18] among others. In chapter two of *Despair*, suddenly the word 'mirror' occurs as the narrator rambles along. He is 'disguised so well as to be invisible to his own self'[19], even in the mirror. 'Now that is a word I loathe, the ghastly thing! I have had none of the article ever since I stopped shaving. Anyway the mere mention of it has just given me a nasty shock, broken the flow of my

[13] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960), p. 29. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Bend Sinister*.

[14] *Strong Opinions*, p. 90.

[15] *Speak, Memory*, p. 59.

[16] *Ada*, p. 129.

[17] *Ada*, p. 69.

[18] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Lolita*, (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1958). All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Lolita*.

[19] *Despair*, p. 30.

story (please imagine what should follow here—the history of mirrors) . . .'[20] The appeal to the reader's imagination is meant to cover the narrator's emotion, to enhance the reader's creativeness, or to make fun of him. In *Lolita,* Humbert Humbert reflects in a curious way on this method of inviting the reader's participation. His mood is even more aggressive: 'As greater authors than I have put it: "Let readers imagine etc." On second thoughts, I may as well give those imaginations a kick in the pants.'[21]

It is no wonder that some readers may become exasperated by such apostrophes, but they are helped along nevertheless, and cheered up, if necessary, by a seemingly good-natured or even tender narrator in other places: 'Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tender-hearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me: I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; (. . .) let's even smile a little. After all, there is no harm in smiling.'[22] Patiently correcting bad reading habits and nevertheless pleading humbly for a smile on the stern lips of a serious reader, the narrator fulfils his functions as seems best to the author. Another, happier smile can be noticed in *Despair* where a reader who has just solved a riddle gets a little encouragement: 'You smile, gentle reader? and indeed, why should you not smile?'[23]

The narrator-reader relationship may even grow so intimate that (imaginary) walks are proposed to cool down an excited reader: 'But be patient with me, my reader. The walk we shall presently take will be your rich reward.'[24] Thus subtly preparing his reader for fictional movements, the narrator masks an authorial transition. A similar invitation is made in *The Gift,* under the pretext of introducing the reader to the mysteries of nature: 'Give me your hand, dear reader, and let's go into the forest together.'[25] This is a rich reward indeed for an indulgent and tenacious reader!

Nabokov's big problem is to keep the reader concentrated on his text which is not always an easy task. A scandalous reader is imagined as

[20] *Despair,* p. 30.
[21] *Lolita,* p. 67.
[22] *Lolita,* p. 131.
[23] *Despair,* p. 43.
[24] *Despair,* p. 62.
[25] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *The Gift,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), p. 313. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *The Gift.*

having breakfast while consuming the philosophical Part Four of *Ada.* At one point, however, the narrator (Van) thinks that he has caught his attention. It is this passage that generates the reader out of nowhere, a fleeting remark of the narrator presents him in a few details: 'Yet I trust that my reader, who by now is frowning over these lines (but ignoring, at least, his breakfast), will agree with me that there is nothing more splendid than lone thought . . .'[26] Such 'circumstantial readers' are created as if they were literary characters; the one mentioned above exists only in his frown over a difficult book and his breakfast, which is no doubt growing cold.

Nabokov and his narrators very often oppose the reader's attitudes to sex.[27] Whereas naturalness would prevent any problems from arising, there are many prudish readers on the one hand, and others who tend to see sexual symbols in everything on the other hand. These two excesses are continually fought against. Let me give one example of each kind:

When Ada and Van are discussing Proust, a basic idea occurs: 'It [Proust's work] makes sense if the reader *knows* that the narrator is a pansy, and that the good fat cheeks of Albertine are the good fat buttocks of Albert. It makes none if the reader cannot be supposed, and should not be required to know *anything* about this or any other author's sexual habits in order to enjoy to the last drop a work of art.'[28] In an interview, however, Nabokov refused to discuss the topic of sex, finding it 'too tedious for words.'[29]

In his postscript to *Lolita,* Nabokov again clearly states his loathing for Freudian symbolism: 'I detest symbols and allegories (which is due partly to my old feud with Freudian voodooism and partly to my loathing of generalizations devised by literary mythists and sociologists) . . .'[30] For the critic this must mean that Nabokov's work cannot be described by way of symbolism and generalizations; his work is 'mythproof'[31]. Hence I have decided to devote my critical efforts to the details.

[26] *Ada,* p. 423.

[27] Nabokov's ideas on this subject are expressed in several places, e.g. in the afterword to *Lolita:* 'No writer in a free country should be expected to bother about the exact demarcation between the sensuous and the sensual; this is preposterous' (*Lolita,* p. 316). But it is exactly here that Nabokov often walks the tight-rope, which is part of the fun of his fiction.

[28] *Ada,* p. 135.

[29] *Strong Opinions,* p. 23.

[30] *Lolita,* p. 316.

[31] *The Eye,* p. 9 (Preface).

We have seen that the variety of attitudes taken towards, and the number of epithets bestowed on, the innocent reader are considerable in Nabokov's work. I find that the author uses these weapons with a violence that few other writers have equalled. I see the reason for this sometimes aggressive mood in Nabokov's attempt to maintain the excitement in his writings and in his doubt whether there will be readers who are capable of following the 'web of sense' so cunningly woven. He emphasizes this at the end of *Nikolai Gogol:* '... the wrong sort of reader will certainly never get as far as this. But I do welcome the right sort—my brothers, my doubles.'[32] On might say, then, that Nabokov tries to make a selection among his readers, accepting the ones that can be trusted to understand his fictive world and rejecting the others.

[32] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol,* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 149–50. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Nikolai Gogol.*

2. Professional Matters

'But every once in a while I have to remind the reader of my appearance much as a professional novelist.'[1]

Dabney Stuart has stated correctly that the Nabokovian novel theorizes about itself.[2] This is most overt in *Despair, The Gift, Lolita,* and *Ada,* more hidden in other works. The narrator's meditations about the style and form of the novel are meant to disturb the illusion of 'realism'. This may be a desperate means of educating incapable readers, but it is also a way of misleading critics who are trying to find easy solutions for their problems.

It is in the author's prefaces to his novels that many technical questions are raised, too. Annotations, explanations, and mystifications, as well as sallies against hack reviewers and Freudian psychologists, are the main issues there.

A further source of information are the interviews given by the author, a whole body of opinions and comments that imposes itself on the student of Nabokov's world.[3] But there are dangerous traps, for Nabokov's humour can become a weapon when he has to face tedious interviewers.

Nabokov's novels contain many professional statements on the technique of novel writing, on literary traditions, and on literary history, which have as their basis the author's convictions and dogmas. The narrators are, of course, not simply mouth-pieces of the author, for the distance between creator and narrator can be both deceptively short and very long. But as Nabokov admitted having passed on some of his ideas to his 'more responsible characters'[4], an investigation of these views may not be entirely fruitless, as long as one is prepared to keep the necessary reserve.

The Eye shows the way in which a fictional character is gradually shaped by the perception of the other characters. The problem of the

[1] *Lolita,* p. 106. Hermann, the narrator in *Despair,* calls himself an 'amateur': 'And speaking of literature, there is not a thing about it that I do not know. It has always been quite a hobby of mine' (*Despair,* p. 53).

[2] Dabney Stuart, 'Dimensions of parody', *TriQuarterly* 17, pp. 72–95.

[3] Interviews and miscellaneous public prose collected in *Strong Opinions,* op. cit.

[4] *Strong Opinions,* p. 18.

'classification of Smurovian masks'[5] is the framework of the novel. But the first-person narrator sees himself as omnipotent: 'Whenever I wish, I can accelerate or retard to ridiculous slowness the motions of all these people, or distribute them in different groups, or arrange them in various patterns, lighting them now from below, now from the side . . . For me, their entire existence has been merely a shimmer on a screen.'[6] The author (and sometimes also the narrator) has indeed the same power as the director of a film, the freedom to produce what he thinks fit. Another metaphor was used in an interview to express the same idea basically: 'I am the perfect dictator in that private world.'[7] The characters are therefore totally dependent on the creator, and Nabokov denies that a creation ever took hold of him or led an independent life (not even Lolita).

One of Nabokov's favourite devices is parody and it became a central part of his technique from the start. Sebastian Knight used parody 'as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of emotion'.[8] The highest regions of emotion are the aim of the novelist's endeavours and parody is just one means of achieving this excitement. But the question remains open as to whether the reader will be able to meet the requirements. Dabney Stuart summed up the whole problem as follows: 'Nabokov reminds the reader continually, through the form of the book he is reading, that he is reading a book, and to embed in the form of the book itself the possibilities of parody that are more immediately obvious in particular details, character gestures, and diction.'[9] The author does not conceal 'professional matters' as many earlier writers often did, but he cunningly integrates them into the text. *Despair* was a first attempt on a major scale, *Lolita* and *Ada* the masterpieces.

Many of the author's opinions are attributed to the artists and dabblers in Nabokov's fiction, but it is extremely difficult to make out the author's intentions. When, for instance, Rex[10] professes his credo, he cannot be far from his creator's doctrines (although otherwise they have

[5] *The Eye,* pp. 59/60. Smurov is the main character.

[6] *The Eye,* pp. 93/94.

[7] Strong Opinions, p. 69.

[8] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 76. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Sebastian Knight.*

[9] *TriQuarterly* 17, p. 73.

[10] Axel Rex, an artist whose Muse is cruelty, one of the main characters of *Laughter in the Dark.*

nothing in common): 'In my opinion, an artist must let himself be quided solely by his sense of beauty: that will never deceive him.'[11] Also Albinus, Rex's rival, brings up problems concerning art, and so does a third character in the book, Udo Conrad (a fictitious writer having the same basic ideas as Nabokov himself, a German exiled in France, loathing politics and Freudian novels): 'It will be a long time—a solid century perhaps—before I am appreciated at my worth. That is, if the art of writing and reading is not quite forgotten by then; and I am afraid it is being rather thoroughly forgotten this last half-century in Germany.'[12] Conrad could be seen as an embodiment of Nabokov's antipathy towards the society and certain manners of the Germany that he knew as an émigré, and of his misgivings about the survival of good literature.

Carol T. Williams has shown that Nabokov must have been aware of Hegel's philosophy[13]: the dialectical spiral (thesis—antithesis—synthesis) has been used very often, and sometimes also parodied, by Nabokov. Axel Rex, for instance, played with it in his cartoons, called the effect of it 'superhumour' and thought that he had made a capital invention:

> 'Uncle alone in the house with the children said he'd dress up to amuse them. After a long wait, as he did not appear, they went down and saw a masked man putting the table silver into a bag. "Yes, isn't my make-up good?" said Uncle, taking his mask off. Thus goes the Hegelian syllogism of humour. Thesis: Uncle made himself up as a burglar (a laugh for the children); antithesis: it *was* a burglar (a laugh for the reader); synthesis: it still was Uncle (fooling the reader). This was the superhumour Rex liked to put into his work; and this, he claimed, was quite new.'[14]

Fooling the reader, thwarting his expectations, are sources of delight to Nabokov, and I see the result of the synthesis also in a laugh for the author, or, if not a laugh, at least a sneer. Once more a foolish reader has been created, always willing to accept cheap detective-story effects. This defect is consciously exploited by Nabokov and it is a stock experience of his readers to feel their laughter freeze on their lips. Another instance

[11] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 117. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Laughter in the Dark.*

[12] *Laughter in the Dark,* p. 139.

[13] Carol T. Williams, 'Nabokov's Dialectical Structure', *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, vol. VIII/2* (Madison, Wis.; Wisconsin UP, 1967), pp. 250–67. This collection will hereafter be referred to as *Wisconsin Studies.*

[14] *Laughter in the Dark,* p. 92.

of this game is to be found in *Despair,* where it is the basis of a *Doppelgänger* motif:

> 'If every now and again my face pops out, as from behind a hedge, perhaps to the prim reader's annoyance, it is really for the latter's good: let him get used to my countenance; and in the meantime I shall be chuckling quietly over his not knowing whether it was my face or that of Felix[15]. Here I am! and now—gone again; or maybe it was not I! Only by this method can I hope to teach the reader a lesson . . .'[16]

This kind of hide and seek or catch-as-catch-can is yet another way of educating inexact or sluggish readers, it is horse-play that forces them to read their text closely. The problems to be solved are numerous; for example, problems of identity arise, such as 'who is the narrator?' or 'who is Felix?', 'are the two identical?' etc. Such difficulties leave the reader bewildered and compel him to reread the passage in question.

Indications about the style and mood of the narrators abound, especially in *Despair:* 'I have lapsed again into the past tense, but never mind, my pen finds it more convenient so.'[17] Or a bit further on, 'how racily I write and, what is more, how cool I am, how perfectly self-possessed'.[18] Such rhetorical devices were used by many writers in the past (Fielding, Sterne, Byron, Gogol, and Lautréamont to mention but a few) but rarely with such density and directness. Here, too, the medium is under total control and sometimes military metaphors are used to express this: 'At this point (. . .) it is meet, I presume, that I should bid my prose stand at ease and quietly retracing my steps, try to define my exact mood that morning.'[19] In the course of this novel we shall find more detailed comment on the narrator's style and peculiarities. He welcomes new words to his vocabulary, makes remarks such as 'I note for my own pleasure the smooth run of that sentence'[20], relishes the juice of a pun, indicates how to pronounce outlandish words ('knicker-

[15] Nabokov called Felix a 'false double' (of Hermann, the narrator). Further remarks concerning this subject: 'The *Doppelgänger* subject is a frightful bore' and 'There are no "real" doubles in my novels' (*Strong Opinions,* pp. 83–84).

[16] *Despair,* pp. 38–39.

[17] *Despair,* p. 38.

[18] *Despair,* p. 126.

[19] *Despair,* pp. 17–18.

[20] *Despair,* pp. 40–41.

bockers—the "k" is sounded'[21]), gives the preface somewhere in the middle of the novel[22], and chooses the title for it somewhere near the end of it. This may show the extent to which chronology has been abandoned[23] and how thoroughly this novel comments on itself.

The narrator in *Despair* very often indulges in 'word-play': 'I liked, as I like still, to make words look self-conscious and foolish, to bind them by the mock marriage of a pun, to turn them inside out, to come upon them unawares. What is this jest in majesty? This ass in passion? How do God and Devil combine to form a live dog?'[24] Many games of this kind are played in Nabokov's fiction and many legs are pulled. In addition to anagrams, riddles and mystifications, there are a great number of alliterations, 'a hell of alligator alliterations'[25], 'verbal rejects'[26], 'alliterative retaliators'[27], an 'orgy of epithelial alliterations'[28], a 'madhouse of consonants'[29]. All these elements constitute a 'zoo of words'[30] with strange inhabitants indeed.

Chapter three in *Despair* is so rich in examples of the narrator discussing his techniques that it does not even seem to start: 'How shall we begin this chapter? I offer several variations to choose from. Number one (readily adopted in novels where the narrative is conducted in the first person[31] by the real or substitute author) . . .'[32] This is followed by a few meteorological indications, the gradual introduction of a new character (Orlovius); and again theorizing about the proceedings, he

[21] *Despair,* p. 62.

[22] The narrator comments on this as follows: 'Not an easy book to write, though. It is now especially, just as I am getting to the part which treats, so to speak, of decisive action, it is now that the arduousness of my task appears to me in full; Here I am, as you see, twisting and turning and being garrulous about matters which rightly belong to the preface of a book and are misplaced in what the reader may deem its most essential chapter' (*Despair,* p. 155).

[23] This was later to become a favourite technique in the 'Nouveau Roman'.

[24] *Despair,* p. 54.

[25] *The Gift,* p. 133.

[26] *The Gift,* p. 333.

[27] *Ada,* p. 62.

[28] *Ada,* p. 22.

[29] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960), p. 104. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Bend Sinister.*

[30] *Speak, Memory,* p. 180.

[31] This is the case in *Despair* and *Lolita.*

[32] *Despair,* p. 51.

writes: 'A nice refreshing variation, this number one; it allows a breather and helps to bring in the personal note; thus lending life to the story—especially when the first person is as fictitious as the rest. Well that is just the point: a trick of the trade, a poor thing worn to shreds by literary fiction-mongers, does not suit me, for I have become strictly truthful.'[33]

In the next chapter even 'the epistolic form of narration' is taken into consideration, at once cruelly mocked and discarded (but nevertheless used for a spell in chapter seven). Many other devices are parodied and then abandoned in the course of the novel. Hermann thinks of writing 'a little pretty-pretty and slightly licentious story in the Oscar Wilde style'[34], or conversations in the manner of Dostoevski. At the very end the tale 'degenerates into a diary'; 'a diary, I admit, is the lowest form of literature'.[35] (Time indication: March 31st. Night.) The diary turns out to be a very short one because the next entry reads: 'The danger of my tale deteriorating into a lame diary is fortunately dispelled.' (April 1st.)[36]

[33] *Despair*, p. 51.
[34] *Despair*, p. 110.
[35] *Despair*, p. 201.
[36] *Despair*, p. 204.

3. Nabokovian Criticism

'Scholarship without humility or humour is a basic type of pedantry.'[1]

Nabokov's longer critical works are *Nikolai Gogol* and *Eugene Onegin*[2] (introduction, translation, and comment). I shall try to show some of the workings of this criticism, point out the author's firm, unshakeable beliefs about great art and the subjects he deems worthwhile studying in detail himself. He qualified both works as 'cribs', their aim being to make non-Russians start learning the language of Pushkin, Gogol, and Nabokov, thus enabling them to enjoy their works in the original. It is certainly not 'criticism of ideas' that Nabokov attempts in his studies; this is a method he abhors. In his concept, the evaluation of style is much more important. Nor are they biographies in the usual sense. Nabokov is true to the maxim that 'the best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures, but the story of his style'.[3] In Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* the concept of literal translation is of central importance. The commentary is most revealing in many respects. Some knowledge of this body of criticism should make it possible to study Nabokov himself with more indulgence or more respect than has sometimes been the case hitherto. For this chapter I have chosen material that is either of general interest or may serve as a signpost for the ensuing investigation. It should be kept in mind that Pushkin and Gogol are writers whom Nabokov appreciates very much, but that the following reflections are not a discussion of influences.

[1] *Eugene Onegin, VNEO* i, p. 46.

[2] This is a very extensive study (it took Nabokov about eight years to compile, roughly the same time it took Pushkin to create *Eugene Onegin (EO)*. My references adopt the system which Nabokov uses in his work (including his 'Method of Transliteration'):

a) *References to A. Pushkin's poem* (in Nabokov's translation):
APEO cantos: One, Two, Three, etc.
stanzas: I, II, III, etc.

b) *References to Nabokov's four-volume study:*
are always given in small Roman numbers (to avoid confusion with the numbering of Pushkin's stanzas):
VNEO vols.: i, ii, iii, iv.

[3] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Mary (Mashenka)*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. XIII (Preface). All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Mary*.

A. Nikolai Gogol

This critical study, published in 1944, is a model for the workings of Nabokov's literary criticism, constantly illuminating and opening up to a new understanding of the difficult works of Gogol. There is, undoubtedly, a congeniality between the two authors, which manifests itself above all in their keen sense of humour. Gogol is, according to Nabokov, Russia's greatest prose stylist.

The book opens with the date and circumstances of Gogol's death and it ends with his birth (on the first of April, of all days). For Nabokov these two main events of a life are similar; birth is preceded by a void and death is followed by it, and so they can be interchanged with impunity. Of five chapters, only one is biographical, the rest of them being devoted to a presentation of Gogol's masterpieces. At the beginning, Nabokov enlarges on 'the curiously physical side of Gogol's genius'[4], 'his absolute bodily exhaustion in result of a private hunger strike'[5], 'after effects of Malaria and malnutrition'[6], and the ridiculous treatments that he was subjected to. Gogol's nose, his 'olfactivism'[7], his 'gusto for smells, sneezes and snores'[8], snuff-taking, the dripping, twitching, and roughly handled noses in his fiction form a regular 'nasal leitmotiv'[9]. Gogol was not only an innovator in artistic perception, as we shall see, but 'Gogol's long sensitive nose had discovered new smells in literature (which led to a new "frisson")'.[10]

Thin little Gogol's 'noblest inner organ' had been his stomach, blessed with the capacity to digest enormous quantities of macaroni or cherry pie. ('The belly is the belle of his stories, the nose their beau.'[11]) The description of a daguerrotype reveals Gogol's features and clothes, which gives life to the spectre. 'His boyhood? Uninteresting.'[12] His dubious sex life ('he showed complete indifference towards women, insofar as the facts of his riper years show'[13]), his 'monstrous propensity for travelling

[4] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 3.
[5] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 1.
[6] Ibid.
[7] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 4.
[8] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 3.
[9] Ibid.
[10] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 5.
[11] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 3.
[12] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 8.
[13] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 21.

and obscure persecution mania'[14] are mentioned as facets of his mysterious character, which is presented like a fictional composition.

Nikolai Gogol does not aim at completeness (it was originally conceived as an introduction for students), juvenilia and less relevant works are not discussed in detail, it is based on Gogol's three masterpieces: *The Government Inspector, Dead Souls,* and *The Overcoat,* each of which is granted a chapter. Several letters from Gogol to his mother are used for biographical references. But the main part is devoted to Gogol's style, and it is natural that certain pet notions of Nabokov show through when he deals with the more general problems in Gogol's work: the futility of general or abstract ideas; the unimportance of plots and extensive biography; the worthlessness of didacticism, of nationalistic or so-called realistic fiction. These are some of the features of Gogol's style that are extolled: his gift for creating the implied reader, his extraordinary power of description; the spontaneous generation of characters ('secondary characters pop out at every turn of his work'[15]), 'gushes of seemingly irrelevant details'[16], the importance of objects 'made to play a part as important as that of characters'[17], and the dazzling combination of sundry items in his fiction. Gogol's inspiration is said to be 'working in a void'[18], which is an essentially Russian faculty, as we are told. Gogol's technique of the absurd is the subject of a detailed discussion[19], as well as his revolutionary modes of perception. He saw virtually new colours and shades and introduced them into literature, replacing traditional colour schemes and commonplace metaphors.

A most revealing and, for the following considerations, decisive statement is made by Nabokov near the end of *Nikolai Gogol:* '. . . after the reading of Gogol one's eyes may become *gogolized* and one is apt to see bits of his world in the most unexpected places.'[20] Now this would no doubt cause many people to assume that Nabokov was directly influenced by Gogol. When the former was asked whether this was so, he protested: 'I was careful *not* to learn anything from him. As a teacher, he is dubious

[14] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 13.
[15] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 42.
[16] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 47.
[17] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 52.
[18] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 76.
[19] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 141. We learn here, for instance, that 'the absurd was Gogol's favourite muse'.
[20] *Nikolai Gogol,* p. 144. My italics.

and dangerous (...) at his best, he is incomparable and inimitable.'[21] What may have been passed on to Nabokov is a way of perceiving reality and has only little in common with literary methods.

The Government Inspector is called a 'dream play'[22], and, by way of discussing it, Nabokov provides his definition of 'poetry': 'Gogol's play is poetry in action, and by poetry I mean the mysteries of the irrational as perceived through rational words. True poetry of that kind provokes—not laughter and not tears—but a radiant smile of perfect satisfaction, a purr of beatitude—and a writer may well be proud of himself if he can make his readers, or, more exactly, some of his readers, smile and purr that way.'[23] This is, of course, not everybody's definition of poetry, but the delight caused by emotion is no doubt felt by many perceptive readers. The basic concept of the irrational is further exemplified in the discussion of *The Overcoat*. The axiom 'Great literature skirts the irrational'[24] is of primary importance in Nabokov's scale of literary evaluation and for an understanding of his own works. Gogol has achieved this only in some of his books (the ones that Nabokov discusses), the rest is considered almost worthless.[25] Nabokov sees the 'sudden focal shift' from the rational to the irrational as Gogol's greatest achievement, 'with Gogol this shifting is the very basis of his art'.[26] These movements break up the whole structure of fiction, the results are absurd dream or nightmare worlds, where 'reality' is a *trompe l'oeil* stage setting; the seemingly 'real' elements are thrown into the dream to make it even more disturbing. The following statement generalizes the possibilities of applying this method: 'The sudden slanting of the rational plane of life may be accomplished of course in many ways, and every great writer has his own method.'[27] This seems to invite a study of this device in Nabokov's fiction, where it is used throughout and with highly imaginative variations.

[21] *Strong Opinions*, p. 103.
[22] *Nikolai Gogol*, p. 54.
[23] *Nikolai Gogol*, p. 55.
[24] *Nikolai Gogol*, p. 141.
[25] It is above all Gogol's tales with a folkloristic background that Nabokov objects to.
[26] *Nikolai Gogol*, p. 140.
[27] Ibid.

B. Alexander Pushkin: Eugene Onegin

Nabokov's chief aim in his monumental study of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* was to provide a literal translation of the Russian original. This had never been attempted before because of the countless difficulties involved. The work's idiosyncrasies, its cultural background and anachronisms, were the main impediments for a translation of this kind. Nabokov was singularly predestined to undertake the task, as he is deeply rooted in both the Russian and English languages and cultures; moreover, he was able to trace the works of many eighteenth century French writers who had possibly influenced Pushkin in the composition of *Eugene Onegin.*

Nabokov's definition of 'translation' as he sees it, is not to be found in the introduction, where one would expect it, but in the commentary:

> 'A "literal translation", as I understand it, is a somewhat tautological term, since only a literal rendering is, in the true sense, a translation (...). First of all, "literal translation" implies adherence not only to the direct sense of a word or sentence, but to its implied sense; it is a semantically exact interpretation and not necessarily a *lexical* one (pertaining to the meaning of a word out of context) or a *constructional* one (conforming to the grammatical order of words in the text). In other words, a translation may be, and often, is, both lexical and constructional, but it is only then literal when it is contextually correct, when the precise nuance and intonation of the text are rendered."[28]

Nabokov sacrifices the rhyme to accuracy, unlike his predecessors, whose 'clumsy paraphrases' tried to replace them. In the commentary, former translators like Messrs. Elton and Spalding and the Misses Radin and Deutsch are usually summoned *in globo* like bad pupils, when their versions of the text are particularly inept.[29] They are the object of a

[28] *VNEO,* iii, p. 185.

[29] Their marks are not particularly bright:
'incomprehensible Miss Deutsch'
'matter-of-fact Lt. Col. Spalding'
'solecistic Prof. Elton'
'helpless Miss Radin'
(*VNEO,* ii, p. 138).

great deal of irony, sarcasm, and deserved reproof: there is a condemnation of their sins of 'omission and commission'[30] (moving away from, or adding to, the original meaning for the sake of metre and rhyme), of their 'rewriting' instead of translating the author.[31] Nabokov complained about 'a version that for sheer imbecility can hardly be matched'[32], finds that 'Translator X is under the impression of having translated that poet'[33], and notices with pleasure another translator's 'rhetorical harakiri'[34]. In the long commentary to *Eugene Onegin* there are some personal remarks, a good deal of valuable information about Russian life before the Revolution[35], and also a discussion of the merit of certain literary works and methods; for instance, Nabokov repudiates 'prototypism': 'I object to the prototypical quest as blurring the authentic, always atypical methods of genius.'[36]

Many critics saw in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* a realistic work and eagerly tried to file Tatiana[37] as 'the national type of the Russian woman'. This is, of course, questionable and criticism of this kind caused Nabokov to define some literary terms as he uses them, which is clearly of value when one is studying his works. It is once more the notion of 'realism' that is most problematical: 'A "realistic" work of fiction is one wherein the author is ready to name or describe without fear of traditional restriction any physical or moral detail pertaining to the world he perceives. (In this sense *Eugene Onegin* is neither sentimental nor realistic, while containing elements of both; it parodies the classical and leans toward the romantic.)'[38] The first part of this definition could be

[30] *VNEO*, ii, p. 286.
[31] *VNEO*, ii, p. 440.
[32] *VNEO*, ii, p. 333.
[33] *VNEO*, iii, p. 27.
[34] *VNEO*, iii, p. 243.
[35] Nabokov provides facts about customs, manners, and fashions, about fauna and flora etc. It was in these fields that some translators have made their worst mistakes. The author's comment: 'I expect some acknowledgement for all this information from future translators of Russian classics' (*VNEO*, ii, p. 326).
[36] *VNEO*, ii, p. 229.
[37] The heroine of *Eugene Onegin*.
[38] *VNEO*, iii, p. 33. Nabokov defines his notions of 'classical', 'sentimental', etc, in the same place.

applied to most of Nabokov's own works, as well as to many others. The following reply, which Pushkin intended to address to his critics in a footnote to *Eugene Onegin,* may show how close their ideas sometimes are.[39] It contains two of Nabokov's pet notions and firmly held convictions: 'The most insignificant subject may be selected by the author for his poem. Critics need not discuss *what* the author describes. They should discuss *how* he describes it.'[40]

What is even more interesting than the more general, sometimes sweeping statements on literature, is Nabokov's examination of devices and methods in *Eugene Onegin.* Many of them are just as important in a discussion of his own works: the tabulation device, the enumeration of related or unrelated subjects[41], and transitions and digressions. Nabokov confesses to having been influenced in the choice of the authors whom he wanted to study by their handling of transitions and defines the following types: 'Roughly, there are two main types of transition, the narrational, or natural, and the authorial, or rhetorical.' There are also transitions from the general to the particular or vice versa, and temporal transi-

[39] Nabokov acknowledged his debt in his poem 'On Translating *Eugene Onegin*':

'What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter
And profanation of the dead.
The parasites you were so hard on
Are pardoned if I have your pardon,
O Pushkin for my stratagem:
I travelled down your secret stem,
And reached the root, and fed upon it;
Then, in a language newly learned
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza, patterned on a sonnet,
Into my honest roadside prose—
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.'

(Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Poems and Problems,* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 175.

[40] Nabokov expresses the same idea more than once, as we have seen. Chateaubriand, an author whom Nabokov appreciates, is quoted to corroborate his conviction; he has said: 'On ne vit que par son style.' (*VNEO,* ii, pp. 346–47).

[41] For instance *APEO,* One XXII, or *Lolita,* pp. 157–60, to give two striking examples.

tions.[42] We learn that 'digression' is only one form of authorial participation and we get a whole list of others:

> 'Autobiographical matters (more exactly, stylized autobiographizations) that can be classified under such headings as musings, lyrical, amorous, nostalgic; matter-of-fact remarks on the author's mode of life at the time of writing or at former times; melancholy or jocose allusions to real circumstances and real people; promises or memories of fictional events; and assumed friendships with invented characters. Autobiographizations merge and mingle with professional matters, which include remarks on the author's actual work of composing, on his characters as characters, on his other products, past, present, or anticipated, on his habits of writing, on the writings of others, and so forth. Finally a form of participation is presented by "philosophizings", which are more or less didactic, serious, semi-serious, or facetious asides, sometimes in the form of parenthetical remarks, often in that of brief aphoristic formulas.'[43]

This is no doubt a very apt description of the many shrewd tricks that Pushkin so cunningly used, but it is also a clue to which techniques the translator himself finds inspiring, examples of which could be provided from his own works.[44] Forms of authorial participation had been used by many writers in the past[45], but only a few authors have tried to introduce 'lectorial participation', among them are Joyce, Pound[46], and Nabokov. This type of rhetoric is especially difficult to handle as one has to apply new concepts. It requires creators who are not merely storytellers, but highly conscious artists, and readers who are not sleepwalkers, but active participants in the process of creation of a work of art.

[42] *VNEO*, i, pp. 19–20.

[43] Ibid.

[44] The two preceding chapters dealt with some of these problems. Nabokov's critics seem to have come to an agreement to define all these techniques as 'involution'. A. Appel jr. listed seven basic ways (autobiographic themes are not included): parody, coincidence, patterning, work-within-the-work, staging of the novel, and authorial voice. (Alfred Appel jr., *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. XXVI–XXXIII.)

[45] For instance the ones mentioned above (p. 26): Fielding, Sterne, Byron, Gogol, Lautréamont.

[46] Nabokov came to similar results as Ezra Pound. Compare Max Nänny, *Ezra Pound: Poetics for an Electric Age*, (Bern: Francke, 1973), part II, 'Art as Co-Creation', pp. 90–103, and William W. Rowe, *Nabokov's Deceptive World*, ch. 4, 'Reader Participation', pp. 61–72.

4. Recurrences

'Repetition is a beloved wife of whom one never tires.'[1] (Søren Kierkegaard)

It has become fashionable for critics dealing with Nabokov to mention some recurrences in his works. In *Lolita* the network of clues and repetitions has been studied more closely than in other novels.[2] It is, however, a basic stylistic feature in all of them. The forms it takes are visible on many levels: in names (e.g. Humbert Humbert), in a sentence or in a paragraph, in a book or in different works. There are the poetical devices of assonance and alliteration, thematic repetitions, leitmotivs, and *déjà-vu* experiences. Another form of repetition can be seen in the constancy with which certain epithets are attached to some characters: Margot Peters is the snake, Charlotte Haze 'the phocine mamma'[3], 'the clumsy seal'[4], and Pnin is often surrounded by squirrels.

Significantly, the synecdoche is one of Nabokov's favourite figures when describing a character or an object.[5] It is this method that makes a rereading of his novels both enjoyable and compulsory. Close reading alone will reveal the intricacies of anticipation and retrospection in Nabokov's fiction.

Repetitions can be seen as obsessions of the author (or reader), as didacticism, slips of the memory, artistic economy, or patterning of a text. Kawin distinguishes between 'destructive repetition', with 'neurotic, habituating and enervating properties', and 'constructive repetition', with the tendency to 'emphasize, interweave and lyricize'.[6] Kawin sees repetition as a 'non-verbal state', as a 'key to the expression of experience', and he believes that 'through repetition even the unutterable can be made manifest'.[7] Of course one will also have to make the distinction between 'repetition-reproduction' and 'repetition-variation'.

[1] Quoted by B. F. Kawin, *Telling it Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film,* (Cornell UP, 1972), p. 181. This study is henceforth cited as Kawin.

[2] This has above all been the case in the two following works: C. F. Proffer, *Keys to Lolita,* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968), and A. Appel jr., *The Annotated Lolita,* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

[3] *Lolita,* p. 44.

[4] *Lolita,* p. 89.

[5] Cf. his definition of 'realism' mentioned above, p. 11, (*Strong Opinions,* p. 10).

[6] Kawin, chapters 1 and 2.

[7] Kawin, pp. 7–8.

The interval between repetitions and the context of the occurrences conveys special meaning, as does the actual unit of information. Repetition can be used both in the revival of remembrances of the past and as a sequence of experiences forming 'the eternal present'. This is the same as Nabokov's 'negation of time', which he feels when butterfly-hunting (or writing novels):

> 'I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their foodplants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone.'[8]

The 'superimposition' of patterns in the 'Texture of Time' is the best image of Nabokov's manipulation of 'individual, perceptual time'. Abolishing the intervals between the occurrences leads to 'timelessness', the recurrences are the pattern of conscious repetition, of ecstasy. The absence of 'measurable time' is the void underlying the created structure.[9]

Peter Lubin has shown, among others, that certain characters and details are used in more than one Nabokov novel:

> 'Characters and verbal props move from book to book. Lang paints a mural in *Pnin*[10] and a portrait in *Pale Fire*[11]. Podtyagin returns from *Mashenka*[12] to serve as an extra in *The Gift*. Pnin shows up in *Pale Fire*, Delalande in *The Gift* and in the Foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading*[13]. The intoxicating sob from Mallarmé mentioned once in *The Gift* haunts *Bend Sinister*. The "Macédoine of accents" in *Ada* summons up not only the description of Humbert, that "salad of racial genes", but also the "kompot slov" of Pomyalovski of *Dar* putters[14] around the platbounds along the Chemin de Mustrux in *Ada*.'[15]

[8] *Speak, Memory*, pp. 109–10.

[9] A. Appel finds that 'Nabokov confronts the void by virtue of his play-concept' (A. Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. XIX).

[10] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Pnin*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971). All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Pnin*.

[11] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973). All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Pale Fire*.

[12] Nabokov's first novel, *Mary*, (Mashenka), op. cit.

[13] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969). All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Invitation to a Beheading*.

[14] Sic in the text. Misprint for 'potter'?

[15] Peter Lubin, 'Kickshaws and Motley', *TriQuarterly* 17, pp. 187–88.

The web of interconnecting details binds Nabokov's works to a totality that is his fictive world. This list of recurrences is, of course, not exhaustive. The reappearances of characters and names are frequent, but their importance varies greatly: Mary and her husband (Alfyorov) reappear in *The Defence*[16] for short visits, John Shade *(Pale Fire)* has become a standard author in *Ada*. The device is, however, not used with the consistency with which Balzac applied it in his *Comédie Humaine*.

Lastly, it is the name of the author himself that reappears under various guises. He wrote a good deal of his early work under the pseudonym 'Vladimir Sirin'. Here and there such playful anagrammatic names as 'Blavdak Vinomori', 'Vivian Calmbrood', and 'Vivian Darkbloom' are used.

Several times Nabokov employed the puzzling trick of giving the same name to entirely unconnected characters in a novel, which is, of course, not a simple recurrence, but a sly game of the author. In *The Gift,* Fyodor is often invited by the Chernyshevskis, with whom he is acquainted. Chapter four of the novel is devoted to a biography which the hero wrote about a namesake of his host, the nineteenth century writer Chernyshevski.[17] Or, again, when Prof. Krug leaves the hospital where his wife has just undergone a fatal operation, he is asked to stay and wait for a Dr. Krug, who has a car, and can take him home safely. 'No relative of mine', says Krug, 'pure coincidence'.[18] In *Lolita* it is a dentist whose name mimicks Clare Quilty's (Humbert Humbert's nimble opponent in the competition for Lolita's favours and another false double). Such coincidences are perhaps used as one more method of forcing the reader to pay attention to what he is reading.

Thematic recurrences and reiterations of details in a wider sense are the subject of some of the following chapters. I have not investigated, however, three themes which appear with notorious regularity in virtually all of Nabokov's novels: chess, lepidoptera, and literature; many critics have taken rides on these hobby-horses and have found the symbols they were looking for.[19] My concern remains with the seemingly 'real' bodies

[16] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *The Defence,* (London: Panther, 1967). All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *The Defence.*

[17] Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevski (1828–89).

[18] *Bend Sinister,* p. 8.

[19] Cf. Strother B. Purdy, 'Solus Rex: Nabokov and the Chess Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies,* 14 (1968), pp. 379–95. Edmond Bernhard, 'La thématique échiquéenne de *Lolita*', *L'Arc* 24 (Aix-en-Provence: 1964), pp. 39–47.

of the characters, but they are fortunately as fictional as everything else.

Considering repetition at close range, we find the important phenomena of alliteration and assonance, 'mirrored names', and palindromes. The first two are used frequently both in Nabokov's original texts and in his translations of his own works from the Russian period: '. . . *he* *h*as *h*eard the *h*alf-*h*earted visitors *r*ing and *r*ecede.'[20] Or: 'The doctor, holding his kni*f*e and *f*ork, *f*roze: a *f*ly *f*roze on his *f*orehead.'[21] Repetition of sounds is one of Nabokov's favourite devices and an integral part of his prose-style. This can probably best be seen in *Lolita* and *Ada*.

Peter Lubin lists some 'pet words' of Nabokov (sound combinations for which he seems to have a certain preference) in *Ada:* 'grim, limp, limpid, ultimate, dim, whim, megrim, akin and akimbo.'[22] Proffer has studied the 'instrumentation' of Nabokov's prose in detail, too. Here is a list of assonant names from *Lolita:* 'Bryan Bryanski, Sullen Sullivan, Reverend Rigger, Richard Roe, Dorothy Doe'[23] etc. Lubin further mentions the frequency of names like McBeth, McCrystal, McVey etc. and establishes the hypothesis that 'Mc-names could be favoured by Nabokov as the Gaelic equivalent of the Russian patronymic'.[24] I should like to extend this analysis to names based on assonance. A Russian name has three elements: Christian name, patronymic, and name. As the polite form of address (which was used most often before the Soviet Revolution) mentions only the first two, names like the too obvious 'Ivan Ivanovich' were frequent. It is indeed possible that Nabokov continued the Russian onomatology when inventing names for his novels: Cincinnatus C., Humbert Humbert, or Van (=Ivan) Veen could be seen as continuations of this type of nomenclature.

[20] *Lolita,* p. 310.
[21] *Despair,* p. 179.
[22] *TriQuarterly* 17, p. 188.
[23] Proffer, op. cit., p. 95.
[24] *TriQuarterly* 17, p. 204.

PART TWO

BODY: 'BEAUTY AND BEAST'

'Reader, ride by.'
(Ivan Turgenev, quoted by V. Nabokov in *Ada*)

'. . . we had better not
Be too minute; an outline is the best,—
A lively reader's fancy does the rest.'
(Lord Byron, *Don Juan,* Six, XCVIII)

Nobody, it seems, has ever paid much attention to the way in which the bodies of the characters are created in Nabokov's novels, how they are described, made to live and to die. No critic has so far analyzed what shapes they take, how they interact among themselves, and how all this is combined in a powerful system, certain aspects of which I should like to investigate below. 'Body' we have defined as 'a being that did not exist before the book was written'[1], but which seems to live as a 'real' person, or is described in such a way, and which is alive in the minds of author and reader. This body speaks a certain language that may be understood or misinterpreted by his fellow-characters and by the reader of the novel. This message is the open or masked essence of the text, as in some of the works of Balzac, Flaubert, and Proust. The language of the body demands to be read and interpreted as well as the workings of the mind in a novel, both invented and written to constitute the corpus of the work.

In Nabokov's fiction, body and mind can be liable to wild disproportions, as for instance in *The Defence,* where we see an enormous chess-mad brain living in a completely neglected body with hardly any sex life, and in surroundings that are noticed only rarely by the main character. The author insists, however, that in his novels 'The spirit and the body are one'[2], that writing is sensual. Therefore it seems unjust that criticism has hitherto laid considerably more stress on the study of influences, ideas, and mental processes. The importance of the body has been overlooked almost totally in the studies of Nabokov's novels. The author claims, however, that there are no general ideas in, and no influences on, his work. Thus we are left with language and style and with his methods of creating fictional characters.

In the investigation of the body as defined above, it is interesting to see how it is clothed and undressed, groomed or neglected, which parts seem to attract the novelist's attention, what is described in rapid sketches and what is subject to more detailed inspection, and which epithets and accessories are granted to it. Often we can distinguish characters who are likely to enjoy the author's benevolence by some stock traits, such as tasteful clothes and a pedantic observation of the rules of hygiene. The

[1] Roger Kempf, op. cit., p. 5. My approach should not be confused with what Nabokov calls 'human interest criticism' (a hunting for abstract ideas for moral or educational purposes).

[2] Ron Sheppard, Martha Duffy, Timothy Foote, et al., 'Prospero's Progress', *TIME* (May 23, 1969), p. 51.

height of distinction cannot be reached by the snob. The dandy and supreme artist[3] is to be ranked infinitely higher, because he is more detached. The living conditions that a character chooses or accepts, define and characterize him further. Even in the most minute details of his existence there is a total significance attached to the body and its manifestations.

As the fictional body also has a beginning and an end (not necessarily concurring with the book), it may be worth recollecting how Nabokov sees these two facts and the intervening span of life at the beginning of *Speak, Memory:* 'The cradle rocks above an abyss and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.'[4] But we are here exclusively concerned with the intermediary stage: the perception, description, and characterization of the living body; it is a prison for the genius, subject to ardent admiration (especially beautiful women), or just a necessary evil, an obstacle, a mask; or then an émigré's last possession, soulless and hopelessly split between the unloved exile and the unattainable, lost homeland. The émigré's body, which is often the centre in Nabokov's novels, is both a souvenir and the shape of things to come, it is alive and dead at the same time.

In describing and characterizing the body, Nabokov's imagination is equally repetitive and inventive. The use of stunning details, recurrences, and an apparent 'realism' are the main characteristics. Common, everyday aspects of life frequently stand in striking contrast to the absurd and provoking tenor of the narrative; but, on the other hand, there are also 'freak bodies', introducing such 'unrealistic' elements into a seemingly 'realistic' passage.

A certain knowledge of the principles of Nabokov's artistic perception is important for an understanding of his method of creating characters in novels. In an interview he confessed: 'I think I was born a painter—really!—and up to my fourteenth year, perhaps, I used to spend most of the day drawing and painting and I was supposed to become a painter in due time. But I don't think I had any real talent there. However, the sense of color, the love of color, I've had all my life: and also

[3] These two types are often united in one character in Nabokov's novels. The author described several characters that could be labelled as 'dandies': Martin Edelweiss, Sebastian Knight, Demon and Van Veen. The concept of dandyism 'travelled East' from England (Brummel, Byron), to France (Balzac, Baudelaire etc.), and to Russia at about the same time (Pushkin).

[4] *Speak, Memory,* p. 17.

I have this rather strange and freakish gift of seeing letters in color.'[5] This is a peculiarity one has to keep in mind when reading Nabokov: he is a painter painting with the writer's pen or a writer writing with a brush. Nabokov's power of depiction benefits to a great extent from his artistic vision, which is highly functional when describing new species in lepidopterology and when creating poetical effects, activities that have much in common, according to Nabokov.[6] Sight is the all-pervading sense in Nabokov's work and one is tempted to form the hypothesis that it sometimes replaces touch, which is the voyeur's synaesthesia.

The description of a Nabokovian character is not a ready-made portrait which is presented to the reader, the picture is accomplished gradually, by 'constant description', adding up information by bits—a technique that claims much more attention on the part of the reader, who has to put together the puzzle himself. The amount of description allotted to a character is usually proportional to his importance, but in Nabokov's fiction there are many exceptions and special effects, such as, for instance, ellipsis: certain aspects of a character are intentionally omitted in his description or provided only much later in the text. The narrator in *Despair* is conscious of the reader's participation in the process of building up and 'feeding' literary characters, of filling the gaps that are left by the author. The 'vampire-characters' are an excellent image for this method, which gives the reader a sketch and leaves him to his own devices:

> 'An author's fondest dream is to turn the reader into a spectator; is this ever attained? The pale organisms of literary heroes feeding under the author's supervision swell gradually with the reader's lifeblood; so that the genius of a writer consists in giving them the faculty to adapt themselves to that—not very appetizing—food and thrive on it, sometimes for centuries. But at the present it is not literary methods that I need, but the plain, crude obviousness of the painter's art.'[7]

This is just one more indication that both the writer and the painter in Nabokov have a say in the composition of the characters. The 'lifeblood' that the reader is supposed to provide is his effort at co-creation. If he fails to participate, the literary characters will remain still-born.

[5] *Strong Opinions*, p. 17.

[6] Nabokov coupled them with unfamiliar epithets and sees his own aims and activities best expressed in 'the precision of poetry and the excitement of pure science' (*Strong Opinions*, p. 10).

[7] *Despair*, p. 26.

As virtually all the narrators and heroes are males, one could say that the perspective in the description of characters is usually the male's. Looking at Nabokov's novels as a whole, one notices three types of heroines. The first category, removed from their lovers by time, space, or other obstacles, is that of the radiant, divine girls and first loves in Nabokov's early novels (Mary, Vanya, Sonia, Zina). The second group, in his later novels, tends to display perverted images of the more traditional, romantic girl, which, however, remains the fundamental type throughout. The ensuing dichotomy is the reason for the lovers' constant worries (Albinus, Humbert, Van), if they do not choose to overlook the symptoms of depravity in their loves (Margot, Lolita, Ada) and concentrate on their beauty alone. A third sort of females seems to gain ground in Nabokov's latest fiction: the demure, prim virgins of a certain age who offer considerable resistance to their secuders: Armande in *Transparent Things*[8] and Anna Blagovo in *Look at the Harlekins!*[9]

[8] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Transparent Things,* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972). All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Transparent Things.*

[9] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Look at the Harlekins!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

1. The Geography of Bodies

'It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego.'[10]

It is curious to notice the relation between the description of bodies and topography in Nabokov's universe. The desire to be in more places than one is common to several of his characters and it may be seen as the reason for the use of this device. Already in the author's first novel, Ganin was distributed in space and time while he was absorbed in his memories: 'His shadow lodged in Frau Dorn's *pension,* while he himself was in Russia, reliving his memories as though they were realities.'[11] This sort of dispersed consciousness is also felt by the poet in *The Gift,* during the process of 'multi-level thinking'[12] and when composing poetic images in the fusion of totally disparate things.

The body is the measure, too, a system of orientation by means of comparison, relating the known to the unknown. When Hermann studied a map of suburban Berlin, looking for the way to the secluded spot where he intended to kill his 'double', his body was the scale:

'Let us suppose I am holding that map before me; then the city of Berlin, which is outside the picture, may be imagined somewhere in the vicinity of my left elbow (...) the railway line (...) runs along my sleeve cuffward from Berlin. My wristwatch is the small town of Koenigsdorf (...) (the lower button of my waistcoat): Eichenberg. No need, however, to travel as far as that yet; we get off at Koenigsdorf. As the railway line swerves to the east, its companion, the main road, leaves it and continues north alone, straight to the village of Waldau (the nail of my left thumb).'[13]

This sustained image serves a double purpose: it describes vividly the otherwise tedious geographical details of the environs of Berlin and indirectly the narrator himself. The intricacies of the narrative are, of course, much more important than the fictive 'facts', which must be seen in relation to what is already known.

Like several other characters[14], Fyodor's landlord Shchyogolev was fond of talking politics over his soup (which he slopped up after a dram

[10] *Pnin,* p. 17.
[11] *Mary,* p. 55.
[12] *The Gift,* p. 158.
[13] *Despair,* pp. 60–61.
[14] As, for instance, Orlovius in *Despair,* p. 56.

of vodka). Badly informed, he made generalizations on the little that he knew, mixing his cheap vulgarisms with journalistic jargon. The political *données* were projected on the speaker in a strange way, by a listener who was in a poetic mood (and troubled because of the presence of Shchyogolev's stepdaughter Zina, Fyodor's future love): 'At present, while listening to his landlord, Fyodor was amazed by the family likeness between the countries mentioned by Shchyogolev and the various parts of Shchyogolev's own body: thus "France" corresponded to his warningly raised eyebrows; some kind of "limitrophes" to the hairs of his nostrils, some "Polish corridor" or other went along his oesophagus; "Danzig" was the click of his teeth; and Russia was Shchyogolev's bottom.'[15] These are curious politics indeed, and the indirect description is all the more striking because it mentions only a few details. Shchyogolev is stretched out across Europe and Russia, probably to indicate how widespread vulgarity is.

Another poetical treatment of this theme is to be found in *Pale Fire* (strongly reminiscent of the use that some writers in the seventeenth century made of topography in poetry). In his early youth, John Shade had a violent sensation of himself being spread out in space, and this probably set in motion his poetical perception and stimulated his genius: 'There was a sudden sunburst in my head. And then black night. That blackness was sublime.'[16] This event was followed by what is elsewhere described as 'an unbearable intensification of all his senses'.[17] The poem continues with an expression of 'total awareness' and a feeling of the ability to create or become anything imaginable:

> 'I felt distributed through space and time:
> One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand
> Under the pebbles of a panting strand,
> One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,
> In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain.
> There were dull throbs in my Triassic; green
> Optical spots in Upper Pleistocene,
> An icy shiver down my Age of Stone,
> And all tomorrows in my funnybone.'[18]

[15] *The Gift*, pp. 154–55.
[16] *Pale Fire*, p. 33.
[17] Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Glory*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 20. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *Glory*.
[18] *Pale Fire*, p. 33.

This kind of interpenetration is not uncommon in surrealistic paintings and may, indeed, be seen as 'the end of the tender ego': the dissolution of the individual in his surroundings. The distribution is to be seen in two dimensions, in space and time. The more concrete parts of the body are allotted to the earth and to the stars, some more abstract sensations are deposited in the strata of the earth and therefore in the deep past. Though he does not know it, the poet's future amounts to about a fortnight and is situated in a strange place ('in my funnybone'). This probably means the nerve that helps to write the poem that Shade has undertaken and which will be his only continuation. Its fame and circulation are expected to be as widespread as the imagination that created it, the body of the work is meant to continue into the future as far as the body of the poet extended into the past.

At the beginning of Van's romps with Ada, the boy could never be sure whether she was really innocent or indulging in a 'cold game' to disguise her depravity. When, in their explorations of each other, Ada suddenly wanted to ask Van for 'a bit of purely scientific information'[19], Van did not hear the request at first, as he was preoccupied with his fumblings. His indiscretion had revealed his ecstasy to her and Ada persisted in her inquiry; 'why do you get so fat and hard there when you—"Get where? when I what?"'[20] were Van's evasive answers. The boy moaned about her inexperience, '*on n'est pas bête à ce point*'.[21] When she finally gets to the test specimen, she finds a heap of metaphors: '"Relief map", said the primrose prig, "the rivers of Africa". Her index traced the blue Nile down to its jungle and traveled up again.'[22] Her biological comparisons (added to the geographical ones) and her girlish wonder leave Van no choice but to rub and spend against her beneficient nightdress. At this point Ada interferes as narrator in the book to defend her innocence: '*Ah, parlez pour vous:* I, dear, can affirm that those famous fingertrips up your Africa and to the edge of the world came considerably later when I knew the itinerary by heart.'[23] The children decided to sleep together for the first time that night, profiting by the absence of both staff and family, and they pursued their investigations: 'She was inspecting from above his tanned body the ant caravan to the

[19] *Ada*, p. 95.
[20] *Ada*, p. 96.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Loc. cit.
[23] *Ada*, p. 97.

oasis of the navel; he was decidedly hirsute for so young a boy.'[24] Van was attracted and repelled in turns by Ada's innocence, inefficiency, and lack of restraint later on. He expected to find a pure angel and an experienced lover in one person. The narrator's field of metaphors is characteristically exotic (Africa, blue Nile, jungle, caravan, oasis) which appropriately indicates heat[25] and portends the children's first, passionate love-making.

The reason for the frequent use of this theme of distribution, projection, and metaphorization of topography on the body or the other way round, may be found in Nabokov's mentally living in different times and places at once, in Russia, in Europe, and in America. This is, of course, only possible in a world that is imaginary, without temporal or spatial barriers. It can be seen as the poetic expression of political exile. Quite suitably Nabokov professed in an interview: 'I would like my head to be in the United States of the nineteen-sixties, but would not mind distributing some of my other organs and limbs through various centuries and countries.'[26]

[24] *Ada*, pp. 97–98.
[25] There was also a fire not far from Ardis Manor that night in summer.
[26] *Strong Opinions*, p. 48.

2. Pnin's Gesticulations

'Le geste est quelquefois aussi sublime que le mot . . .'[27]

'It soon transpired that Timofey was a veritable encyclopedia of Russian shrugs and shakes, had tabulated them, and could add something to Laurence's files on the philosophical interpretation of pictorial and nonpictorial, national and environmental gestures. It was very pleasant to see the two men discuss a legend or a religion, Timofey blossoming out in amphoric motion, Laurence chopping away with one hand.'[28] Pnin is an embodiment of Nabokov's interest in gestures, a humorous compendium of the art of non-verbal communication, and among Nabokov's characters he is the one who is most addicted to it. This 'silent language' is difficult to describe. It is rich in implied meaning and the only Russian national characteristic that Nabokov cares to stress again and again. Gestures can be more powerful than words, because even simultaneous feelings can be conveyed this way (facial expression, shrug, dumb show of the hands).

Laurence (Pnin's landlord for a certain time) 'even made a film of what Timofey considered to be the essentials of Russian "carpalistics"[29], with Pnin in a Polo shirt, a Gioconda smile on his lips, demonstrating the movements underlying such Russian verbs—used in reference to hands—as *mahnut'*[30], *vspleshnut'*, *razvesti:* the one-hand downward loose shake

[27] Denis Diderot, 'Eloge de Richardson', *Oeuvres,* (Paris: Pléjade, 1951), p. 1064.

[28] *Pnin,* p. 35.

[29] This is a neologism that was created by Nabokov. Peter Lubin comments: 'It is more specific than *kinesics**, the generalized study of gesture, and does not overlap *pasimology,* the science of gestures that do not accompany and enrich speech but clumsily substitute for it. *Carpalistics* may even subsume the most common Soviet gesture, the vetive waggle of fore-finger. The word is not necessary, of course, to describe hands-in-pocket *amerikantsī.*' (*TriQuarterly* 17, p. 192).

* Kinesics is a branch of science that was pioneered by Ray L. Birdwhistell in *Introduction to Kinesics,* (Louisville, 1952) and *Kinesics and Context,* (Pennsylvania, 1970).

[30] This word is further exemplified in *Eugene Onegin.* Nabokov, in his commentary, discusses possibilities of translating this verb: 'There is one obvious case in which literalism has to yield (and settle for an exhaustive gloss): when the phrase concerns national gestures or facial movements, which become meaningless in accurate English; the Russian gesture of relinquishment that

of weary relinquishment; the two-hand dramatic splash of amazed distress; and the "disjunctive" motion—hands traveling apart to signify helpless passivity.'[31] This list is functional in the text, Pnin will have occasion to use these gestures repeatedly in the vagaries of his pathetic fate. They sum up his character rather nicely: weary relinquishment, amazed distress, and helpless passivity.

Laurence G. Clements, Pnin's colleague at Waindell College, first refused 'to have that freak [Pnin] in his house' as a lodger[32] and it was probably his professional interest in gestures that made him change his mind. His lecture 'The Philosophy of Gesture', and the work in progress on the same subject, certainly profited to a great extent by this compromise of accepting somebody who was 'more of a poltergeist than a lodger'[33], mistreating the technical gadgets that were put at his disposal, demolishing the new heater that was put in for his convenience and almost wrecking the washing machine by feeding it his canvas shoes just to see what happened . . .

Pnin's thoughts rested deeply in his Russian language and culture and the English that he spoke was 'murder'. In hopeless situations he thought that the gestural code might perhaps be more international than his Anglicized Russianisms; but this proved to be an illusion because gestures are an element of the vernacular that are often misinterpreted.

Despair, because of his ex-wife's too short visit, her cruel remarks, and her impossible behaviour, and then his thwarted desire, induced Pnin to look for some alcohol in the pantry of his landlady (Joan Clements) who was just coming home and asked him what he was looking for. In Pnin's English the answer was: 'I search, John, for the viscous and sawdust.'[34] Upon Joan's suggestion that they had better have tea instead of

mahnal rukoy conveys is a one-hand downward flip of weary or hasty dismissal and renouncement. If analyzed in slow motion by the performer, he will see that his right hand, with fingers held rather loose, sketches a half turn from right to left. In other words, the gesture really consists of two simultaneous little movements: the hand abandons what it held, or hoped to hold, and the head turns away from the scene of defeat or condemnation. Now there is no way to translate *mahnal rukoy* by means of a verb and the word "hand" or "with hand" so as to render both the loose shake itself and the associations of relinquishment it has' (*VNEO*, III, pp. 19–20).

[31] *Pnin*, p. 33.

[32] *Pnin*, p. 27.

[33] *Pnin*, p. 33.

[34] *Pnin*, p. 50.

whisky, 'he made the Russian "relinquishing gesture"', refusing the tea firmly, as well as her well-meant offer to go through some magazines together.

Tragical and tragi-comical situations abound in *Pnin*. When the above-mentioned ex-wife's son (whom she so cunningly declared to be Pnin's child at the right moments) came to see his 'spiritual father', the latter cast about for two completely inappropriate and conventional gifts: the inevitable book[35] and the no less obvious soccer ball he had such trouble to purchase: '"No, no!" said Pnin, "I do not wish an egg or, for example, a torpedo. I want a simple football. Round!" And with wrists and palms he outlined a portable world. It was the same gesture he used in class when speaking of the "harmonious wholeness" of Pushkin. The salesman lifted a finger and silently fetched a soccer ball.'[36] Again we notice Pnin's inability to master American usage (sports being rather unrelated to his field of studies). He had once more to rely on sign-language, which is here a redundant element. It is curious to see the salesman answering with the same method, lifting a finger to signal: 'I know what you mean.'

In a restaurant, where Pnin and Victor had a meal together, the former soon began to talk about sport. He found out at once, however, that his guest was not in the least interested in this topic.—When they were at home, the unwanted soccer ball was disposed of through the window of the guest room, removed by 'defenestration'. But it is seen once more in the text, floating down the brook behind the house.[37] This is a good example of the tenacity with which even inanimate objects cling to the bit of life that is allotted to them in Nabokov's novels. Pnin replaced the discarded gift by a ten-dollar bill, which Victor appreciated very much.

Pnin's old-world peculiarities (so out of place in the United States), consisted of shaking and kissing hands[38], coughing in his fist with an unexpected 'cavernous sound' (which somehow reminded Joan of a professional Don Cossak she had once met).[39] Or, when his colleagues told 'scabrous anecdotes' at his housewarming party, Pnin could not

[35] Jack London, *The Son of the Wolf*.
[36] *Pnin*, p. 82.
[37] *Pnin*, p. 91.
[38] *Pnin*, pp. 90 and 129.
[39] In *Mary*, Alfyorov is able to recognize a fellow countryman (Ganin) by his clearing of the throat in the adjacant room (*Mary*, p. 13).

follow their type of humour because his own was of a different type.[40] His reaction was yet a new variation in his manifestations of helpless passivity: 'Pnin waved a hand at the raconteur in a Russian "oh-go-on-with-you" gesture.'[41] Or then he received what he thought to be a compliment with an 'I am disarmed'-spreading of both hands.[42]

Pnin's oddities did not remain unnoticed in University life. Mimicking him was a popular sport, which included a reproduction of his speech and movements. Nabokov, who loves coincidences and the ensuing awkward situations, could not resist playing with the idea of confronting a mimic with the model.[43]

At the end of the book, when the narrator himself arrived in town, he was invited to stay at the house of Pnin's master mimic. Cockerell 'had acquired an unmistakable resemblance to the man he had now been mimicking for almost ten years. I was tired and not over-anxious to be entertained throughout the supper with a floor show, but I must admit that Jack Cockerell impersonated Pnin to perfection. He went on at least two hours, showing me everything—Pnin teaching, Pnin eating, Pnin ogling a co-ed (...). It was all built, of course, around the Pninian gesture and the Pninian wild English (...). We got Pnin in the Stacks, and Pnin on the Campus Lake. We heard Pnin criticize the various rooms he had successively rented. We listened to Pnin's account of his learning to drive a car, and of his dealing with his first puncture'.[44]

Pnin is, among Nabokov's characters, the one who uses gestures most often. He thus achieves a minimal form of communication when speech alone fails to accomplish this aim. The difficulty in adjusting to the codes of his new surroundings is noticeable both in his language and in his demeanour. Pnin's gesticulations may be seen as one more indication that the body and its movements often have a crucial signification in the text.

[40] On the other hand we see that Pnin's obsolete Russian humour is not appreciated by his students (*Pnin,* One 1).
[41] *Pnin,* p. 134.
[42] *Pnin,* p. 135.
[43] *Pnin,* p. 30.
[44] *Pnin,* pp. 156–57.

3. Pitiless Description

'No sentimental wanderer will ever be allowed to land on the rock of my unfriendly prose.'[1]

Characters who are deeply disliked by the author or by the narrator are subject to many an act of revenge when they are described in detail. The antipathies are usually very distinctly stressed and insisted upon. In most novels by Nabokov there is such a character: ugly, ignorant, never doing anything right. He is the butt of irony and incomprehensible to the narrator. His baseness or stupidity is like a death sentence, and sympathy is out of the question. It is often the gulf between a genius and his dull surroundings that creates such dislikes. The reason for the loathsomeness of certain characters can be seen in their habit of intruding upon the privacy of the observer, disturbing his calm, his sense of beauty, or his olfactory nerve.

Alfyorov (Mary's husband and therefore Ganin's rival, as she had been *his* first love) is first described in the lift of the *pension* where both he and Ganin were staying: 'His thin hair was slightly ruffled and something about his features reminded one of a religious oleograph: that little golden beard, the turn of that scraggy neck from which he pulled off a bright-speckled scarf.'[2] It is, above all, this character's pathetic beard that is ridiculed again and again. Moreover he had a 'large mobile Adam's apple'[3], a detail that is given to several other repulsive characters by Nabokov. This Alfyorov pestered everybody in the house and Ganin especially suffered from him as their rooms were next to each other. Alfyorov was clumsy, treading on Ganin's feet, overturning his glass at lunch, and then he always mispronounced his name. He was generally *de trop* in Ganin's world at the moment, as the latter lived only for his memories of Mary.

On Ganin's impromptu visit to Alfyorov's room, he saw him 'in his woollen underpants—which make any man, be he built like Adonis or elegant as Beau Brummell look extraordinarily unattractive'.[4] Ganin's disgust reaches a climax when he tries to understand how 'his Mary' could have married this creature, 'that person with the sparse little beard

[1] *Sebastian Knight*, p. 23.
[2] *Mary*, p. 4.
[3] *Mary*, p. 14.
[4] *Mary*, p. 23.

and shiny plump nose'.[5] Alfyorov suffered from the poverty and deprivations of exile, but so did all the other boarders. What made him contemptible was his lack of dignity and his obtrusiveness.

Reading about Mary's long-awaited arrival in Berlin[6] in her telegram, Alfyorov sighed and crossed himself: 'Smiling broadly and stroking his bony thighs, he sat down on the bed and started to rock backward and forward. His watery eyes were blinking rapidly, a slanting shaft of sun gilded his little dung-colored beard.'[7] On the eve of Mary's arrival, a party was given at the *pension* and Ganin's revenge succeeded easily. Alfyorov was made 'royally drunk' by Ganin. He was then put to bed and his alarm-clock was set for many hours after the arrival of Mary . . .

In *King, Queen, Knave,* it is Franz's mother who stands out with her frightful appearance and her vulgarity. She was unloved by her son because she had always preferred his sister Emmie and had boxed his ears until he was nineteen. When he tried to write her a letter ('Dear Mama. What else?') the following impressions take on new life: '. . . he actually could not stand her physical appearance, mannerisms, and emanations, the depressing, depressingly familiar odor of her skin and clothes, the bedbug brown fat birthmark on her neck, the trick she had of scratching with a knitting needle the unappetizing parting of her chestnut hair, her enormous dropsical ankles, and all the kitchen faces she made by which he could unerringly determine what she was preparing—beer soup or bull hodes, or that dreadful local dainty Budenzucker.'[8] This particularly horrid mother must have been torture for the sensitive boy, who had a strong olfactory phobia, which, he hoped, would wear off in Berlin (where he went for work):

'He had hoped that in Berlin he would gradually get over his morbid juvenile squeamishness, but it kept finding mean opportunities to torture him. At table he sat between the plump blonde and the champion swimmer. Whenever she stretched toward the bread basket or salt, her armpit flooded him with nausea reminding

[5] *Mary,* p. 52.

[6] Mary lived in Russia, whereas Alfyorov had left seven years ago, and Ganin even before.

[7] *Mary,* p. 65.

[8] Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave,* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 94. All references will be to this edition, hereafter referred to as *King, Queen, Knave.*

him of a detested spinster teacher at school. The champion on his other side had another infirmity—that of spitting whenever he spoke, and Franz found himself reverting to his schooldays' system of protecting his plate from the spray with forearm and elbow.'[9]

This kind of squeamishness with regard to hygiene and food is particular to many characters in Nabokov's novels.

We have seen the unfavourable descriptions of the rival and the unloved mother. Unloved girls or wives are treated in the same manner. Here gracelessness and plainness are tokens of a bad character or of an impossible relationship. If one compares the different novels, there are certain affinities in the portraits of these unwanted spouses or girl-friends.

Ganin had to get rid of an undesired woman in order to be able to recall more vividly his first love (Mary). He did not know how to break with Lyudmila, whom he now suddenly found repulsive, 'her yellow locks, fashionably bobbed, the two streaks of unshaven black hairs down the nape of her neck, her dark, languid eyelids, and above all her lips, glossy with purple-red lipstick'.[10] It is her artificiality, her pretensions that were most hateful to him; these shortcomings are fatal if one compares Lyudmila and Mary.[11] Lyudmila, this plain and stale-smelling girl, used to 'pout, and flutter her coal-black eyelashes in her performance of a slighted girl or a capricious marquise'.[12] She assumed a childish voice when talking to him, and when he kissed her (on her forehead), 'she forgot all her factitious charms, her modishly yellow hair, sultry face powder and piggy-pink silk stockings—and, tilting back her head, she would press against Ganin her whole feeble, pathetic, unwanted flesh'.[13] The decisive aversion shows in the unflattering epithets; Ganin's mind was made up to break with her as soon as possible.

Hermann, in *Despair,* asked himself what on earth he loved his wife for, as she was superstitious, little educated and little observant, but a great gobbler of trashy books. She was untidy and slovenly, spread 'the sweet vulgar tang of her parfume'[14], and dressed tastelessly. 'Maybe for the warm hazel iris of her fluffy eyes, or for the natural side-wave of

[9] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 80.
[10] *Mary,* pp. 10–11.
[11] Cf. below 'Adorable Mistresses'.
[12] *Mary,* p. 11.
[13] Ibid.
[14] *Despair,* p. 33.

her brown hair, done anyhow, or again for that movement of her plump shoulders.'[15]

This is not an entirely negative picture; we find here a qualification of some criteria that are important to Nabokov's narrators when describing happier girls and women as we shall see later: eyes, hair, and neck are the parts of the body where beauty manifests itself very often.—Lydia's plumpness was functional, as Hermann's preferences went that way: 'She was plump, short, rather formless, but then only pudgy women rouse me. I simply have no use for the young lady, the scrawny flapper, the proud smart whore who struts up and down Tauentzienstrasse[16] in her shiny tight-laced boots.'[17] In this attitude Hermann is very far from Humbert Humbert whose inclinations tend to the opposite type.

The pursuer of girls was blessed with two chubby wives successively, but he found ways and means of removing them both from his life for good (with a great deal of help from fate). Valeria, a Polish lady painter living in Paris, was the first. What had made her attractive to Humbert was 'the imitation she gave of a little girl'.[18] An imitation—when all he craved for was the real thing! This essential difference may explain the very ungentleman-like description that he gave of her retrospectively: 'She looked fluffy and frolicsome, dressed *à la gamine,* showed a generous amount of smooth leg, knew how to stress the white of a bare instep by the black of a velvet slipper, and pouted and dimpled, and romped, and dirndled, and shook her short curly blonde hair in the cutest and tritest fashion imaginable.'[19] The trick, of course, soon wore off and her airs and graces were thenceforth entirely lost on Humbert. But fat, 'poodle-headed' Valeria with a 'rainbow make-up' had enough of her dreary life with him; she managed to trap a taxi-driver (an ex-colonel) with her meagre charms. Humbert first became very angry, but he soon felt better, thinking of his new-found freedom and its unlimited possibilities.

Charlotte Haze was his next victim. She was an American widow with a contralto voice, future landlady and wife of Humbert Humbert, and, above all, Lolita's mother. She was reluctant to make her appearance on his first visit, but she was anticipated by a bit of cigarette ash falling

[15] Ibid.
[16] Spelled 'Tauenzinstrasse' in *Brockhaus' Konversationslexikon, Leipzig,* 1908, II, 764–65.
[17] *Despair,* p. 36.
[18] *Lolita,* p. 27.
[19] *Lolita,* pp. 27–28.

from upstairs: 'Presently the lady herself—sandals, maroon slacks, yellow silk blouse, squarish face, in that order—came down the steps, her index finger still tapping upon her cigarette.'[20] The narrator (Humbert Humbert) had to overcome a certain reluctance to describe her more thoroughly, but he continues at once nevertheless:

> 'I think I had better describe her right away, to get it over with. The poor lady was in her middle thirties, she had a shiny forehead, plucked eyebrows and quite simple but not unattractive features of a type that may be defined as a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich (...). Her very wide-set sea-green eyes had a funny way of traveling all over you, carefully avoiding your own eyes. Her smile was but a quizzical jerk of one eyebrow; and uncoiling herself from the sofa as she talked, she kept making spasmodic dashes at three ashtrays and the near fender (...); whereupon she would sink back again, one leg folded under her.'[21]

The description unfolds quite naturally, as in a film, first from toe to head, then a close-up of the face and of Mrs. Haze's smoking habits. At this moment Humbert had not seen Lolita yet, so he must have been quite objective and fair in his portrait of her mother. In the sequel Humbert prefers to bestow epithets on 'the doomed dear' (40); she was the 'phocine mamma' (44), 'fat Haze' (45), 'the Haze woman' (47), or just simply 'the woman' (47), or 'Haze' (48), in his mind and in his diary.[22]

Humbert refrained from describing her further for a long section in the narrative, until they drove to town, Haze in front, Humbert and Lolita in the back of the car. There were certain ill-feelings between the three, as mamma Haze had intended to leave Lolita behind and had bullied her accordingly. The revenge was inevitable, Humbert was merciless: 'The wings of the driver's Marlenesque nose shone, having shed or burned up their ration of powder, and she kept up an elegant monologue anent the local traffic, and smiled in profile, and beat her eyelashes in profile.'[23] These 'facial gymnastics' are similar to the ones that have exasperated the lovers of Lyudmila, Lydia, and Valeria. But in the light of new possibilities (marrying Haze and being a father to Lolita) Humbert put up with her and confessed even 'that perhaps once or twice I had cast an appraiser's cold eye at Charlotte's coral lips and

[20] *Lolita,* p. 39.
[21] *Lolita,* p. 39.
[22] The references are to *Lolita,* pp. 40–48.
[23] *Lolita,* p. 53.

bronze hair and dangerously low neckline, and had vaguely tried to fit her into a plausible daydream'.[24]

Instead of the often postponed picnic of the whole family near 'Hourglass Lake', Humbert and Haze went there alone one day. She is described once more when entering the water: 'It soon reached the gooseflesh of her thick thighs; and then, joining her outstretched hands, shutting her mouth tight, very plain-faced in her black rubber headgear, Charlotte flung herself forward with a great splash.'[25] Humbert considered the possibility of drowning her there and then, but he could not make up his mind. He learned later that there had been several people around the lake at the time.

But fate took the affair in her firm hand and made a far cleaner job of it at the crucial moment of the novel. A woman of principles, a great taker of pills and a heavy smoker, 'she of the noble nipple and massive thigh'[26], Humbert's 'brand-new large-as-life wife'[27], found out about his real inner life by reading his diary. She was inconsolable and was accidentally run over by a car on the same day.

[24] *Lolita*, p. 72.
[25] *Lolita*, p. 87.
[26] *Lolita*, p. 78.
[27] *Lolita*, loc. cit.

4. Adorable Mistresses

'I have to put the impact of an instantaneous vision into a sequence of words.'[28]

The row of beautiful and lovable women has practically no break in the succession of Nabokov's novels, it is a daisy-chain of rare splendour. What these girls and women have in common, is that they are adored, courted, and loved. There is nothing more banal than that, but what is it that still makes these portraits appealing? Perhaps it is the retrospective view-point of many narrators, a sentimentality in the description of tender relationships that is reminiscent of Turgenev, and the cruelty with which fate brings about the tragedies that separate the lovers for a certain time or forever. There is always the general nostalgia for the past, childhood memories that haunt a whole life, the ordeals of life in exile, and a beneficient passion, be it chess, literature, or lepidoptera. Nabokov seems to draw on a romantic type of love with certain affinities to Pushkin and Turgenev.

Although reluctant to introduce autobiographical material here, I propose to start the series of adorations and comparisons of girls in the author's memoirs with fifteen-year-old Tamara:

'Seen through the carefully wiped lenses of time, the beauty of her face is as near and as glowing as ever. She was short and a trifle on the plump side but very graceful, with her slim ankles and supple waist. A drop of Tatar or Circassian blood might have accounted for the slight slant of her merry dark eye and the duskiness of her blooming cheek. A light down, akin to that found on fruit of the almond group, lined her profile with a fine rim of radiance. She accused her rich-brown hair of being unruly and oppressive and threatened to have it bobbed, and did have it bobbed a year later, but I always recall it as it looked first, fiercely braided into a thick plait that was looped up at the back of her head and tied there with a big bow of black silk. Her lovely neck was always bare, even in winter in St Petersburg, for she had managed to obtain permission to eschew the stifling collar of a Russian schoolgirl's uniform.'[29]

This is, of course, only Tamara's portrait, but her movements, her laughter, and her witty mind are naturally part of the radiance of her personality. The description of this ideal beauty encompasses elements

[28] *Lolita*, p. 90.
[29] *Speak, Memory*, p. 178.

that were passed on to some of Nabokov's heroines in his novels[30] (for instance her graceful, girlish *embonpoint,* her radiance, her chestnut hair, and the down on her cheeks). But every girl or woman has to be presented in her own right, although there are certain recurrent features.

In Nabokov's first novel, *Mary,* the heroine of the same name never actually appears, but she is reflected in Alfyorov's anticipation and Ganin's memories. Nabokov accomplished here the surprising feat of writing a novel in which the main character is absent. Mary could be called a double or a twin sister of Tamara, there are not many changes made in comparison with the prototype. A first glimpse does not make this clear yet: 'Her laugh, her soft features, her dark complexion and the big bow in her hair were all somehow familiar to him . . .'[31] To the attentive reader of the passage quoted above, too, 'this fifteen-year-old, "sweet and remarkable" girl'[32] is not a complete stranger.—Already Ganin's next encounter with her was more revealing:

> 'Ganin saw only one thing: he stared ahead at a brown tress tied with a black bow, slightly frayed at the edges, and his eyes caressed the dark, smooth, girlish sheen of the hair at her temple. Whenever she turned her face sideways to give the girl sitting beside her one of her rapid smiling glances, he could also see the color in her cheek, the corner of a flashing, Tartar eye, the delicate curve of her nostril alternately stretching and tightening as she laughed.'[33]

In 1925, when this novel was written, the body was not described with as much zest as it is nowadays. But we are granted a few more glimpses of the couple. They were much addicted to wet kisses for they had to meet in parks, in museums, or even in the streets of St Petersburg: 'Frost or driving snow only vivified her, and in an icy snowstorm in some dark alleyway he would bare her shoulders; the snowflakes tickled her, she would smile through wet eyelashes, press his head to her, and a miniature snowfall would drop from his astrakhan cap onto her naked breast.'[34]—From another tryst in a public park we learn that she had soft, cool legs and emanated an 'incomprehensible, unique fragrance'. The portrait of this girl includes many features that are used in the description of

[30] In *Speak, Memory,* Nabokov confesses such incidental resemblances or open transfers between his autobiographical and fictional worlds.
[31] *Mary,* p. 44.
[32] Ibid.
[33] *Mary,* pp. 45–46.
[34] *Mary,* p. 70.

lepidoptera[35]: 'a black bow, slightly frayed at the edges', 'the sheen of the hair', the wings (of her nostrils) 'alternately stretching and tightening', and the mysterious fragrance with which lepidoptera attract their mates.

Martha Dreyer, in *King, Queen, Knave,* is a special case in this line of beauties. She is thirty-four years old, a cold, capricious, and sloe-eyed lady. This irritable, extravagant wife of a Berlin businessman is an entirely new type, shamming frigidity as far as her husband is concerned, but prone to dissipations when she met her husband's nephew (Franz).[36] She was a cold wife but an ardent mistress. The two observers see her, of course, with different eyes: the young man with his unconditional admiration and the husband with his frustrated desire.

There are only few indications of Martha's age (ripe body, fear of wrinkles), the rest of the picture would befit a much younger woman. For Franz she was at first taboo for many reasons (being the well-off wife of his uncle and boss and so much older than he). His emotionally affected perspective shows Martha's affinity to other Nabokov creations. Franz contemplated her for the first time on the train to Berlin (fate managed to place the three characters in one compartment while they were still unacquainted): 'Her face was serious, her eyes cold, a little dark down, the sign of passion, glistened above her upper lip, and a gleam of sun brought out the creamy texture of her neck at the throat with its two delicate transverse lines as if traced with a finger-nail across it, one above the other: also a token of all kinds of marvels, according to one of his schoolmates, a precocious expert.'[37] At the next meeting of the future lovers in Dreyer's house, Franz was much hampered by having broken his glasses that Sunday, and so he was not at all sure whether he found this 'blurry, madonna-like beauty'[38] attractive. He noticed only one detail: her unfashionable hair-do 'with a parting in the middle and a chignon behind'.[39]

The next glimpse was Dreyer's, when Martha was sitting at her dressing-table polishing her nails and not heeding her husband's untimely

[35] This theme was again used in *Lolita* (cf. Diana Butler, 'Lolita Lepidoptera', *New World Writing,* 16, 1960, 58–84).

[36] This is a similar situation as in *Lolita* (but there are reversed roles): a young man is seduced by an older woman who is related to him by marriage.

[37] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 6. Franz gives here a fine example of someone reading and interpreting body-language.

[38] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 27.

[39] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 26.

advances (much to his distress she regarded afternoon-lovemaking as a decadent perversion—at least with him): 'Dreyer saw in the mirror the glow of her smooth bandeaux, her knit eyebrows, her girlish breasts.'[40] Innocent Franz soon lost his head completely in front of this woman, who managed to be alone with him more and more often and who seduced him recklessly: 'He would compute within half an inch the exact degree to which she showed her legs while walking about the room and while sitting with her legs crossed, and he perceived almost without looking the tense sheen of her stocking, the swell of her left calf over the right knee; and the fold of her skirt, sloping, soft, supple, in which one would have liked to bury one's face.'[41] He made a complete study of her, looking for flaws in her beauty 'to sober his fancy', but never found any. Franz shares the idea of many Nabokov characters that beauty shows itself often on the neck, nape, and legs of women: 'Most of all he was tormented by the grace and power of her bare neck, by that rich delicately grained texture of skin and the fashionable glimpses of nudity allowed by her short flimsy skirts.'[42] Martha had to teach her protégé almost everything and thus hastened his 'sentimental education'. But their plan to drown Dreyer (who could not swim) in the sea proved to be too much for both of them; Franz began to hate Martha, who was then seen with completely new eyes, gone were radiance and attractiveness; she looked obnoxious in her bathing suit, with 'her rubber cap, her heavy coronation-robes'.[43] Franz thought that she had gone insane and started to realize that he was being exploited.

There was no passion involved in the relationship between Luzhin and his companion in *The Defence*. It is curious that this shows in an almost total absence of description of first the fiancée, and then the wife, of whom we do not even learn the name. She is mentioned by pronouns, alluded to as 'fiancée', 'bride', 'Mrs. Luzhin', or 'Luzhin's wife'.—At first she is only introduced as far as her handbag, which was 'semicircular' and 'made of black silk'. 'He reached for it absentmindedly and began to click the lock'[44], and he predicted that the contents would be spilt sooner or later as it shut badly. Even her part of the dialogue is left out. The later Mrs. Luzhin is a character that is presented with a minimum of

[40] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 38.
[41] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 82.
[42] Ibid.
[43] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 242.
[44] *The Defence,* pp. 56–57.

details. This stunning use of ellipsis is probably also meant to give an idea of Luzhin's state of mind, of the way in which he perceives things. His tense concentration on chess that he cannot cast off, results in a narrowed field of vision. Another partial vision of her is described during one of Luzhin's chess tournaments, which would seem to confirm this interpretation:

> 'Out of the corner of his eye he now saw the legs of the bystanders and found particularly irritating, among all those dark trousers, a pair of woman's stockings and bluish shoes. These feet obviously understood nothing of the game, one wondered why they had come. . . . Those pointed shoes with transverse straps or something would better be clicking along a sidewalk . . . as far away as possible from here.'[45]

Luzhin saw only after the game that these feet belonged to his fiancée.

This is again a very incomplete description and we have to wait until the wedding-night to find a more detailed picture, this time coming from Mrs. Luzhin herself. She examined herself while sitting in the bath: 'Settling down up to her neck, she saw herself through the already slightly soapy water, her body thin and almost transparent, and when a knee came just barely out of the water, this round, glistening, pink island was somehow unexpected in its unmistakable corporality.'[46] But once more the body remains fragmented, her character hardly embodied. This reflects faithfully the lack of attention paid to her body so far by the narrator and by Luzhin himself. But it may also be a sign of Mrs. Luzhin's want of self-assertion and undeveloped physical feeling. Consulting the mirror, she came to the following results: 'Turkish beauty', 'pretty well built on the whole', and 'a bit full in the hips'.[47] But her charms were entirely ineffective when she tried to appeal to Luzhin—already snoring in the bedroom.

One of Nabokov's most entrancing heroines is no doubt Zina Mertz in *The Gift*. Her radiance, her modesty, and her understanding character attracted Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, a Russian émigré poet living in Berlin, like Zina and her mother. He adored her, but he thought that he could not love her unreservedly because his study of Russian literature and the writing of books were his great passions and took up a great amount of his time and energy. But *The Gift* is the only Nabokov novel

[45] *The Defence*, p. 96.
[46] *The Defence*, p. 143.
[47] *The Defence*, pp. 143–44.

that allows the reader to conceive the possibility of a happy end[48]. The narrative fades out on insecurity about the future of the lovers.

Zina's refusal to talk to Fyodor at home was caused by her difficult situation and this complicated their relationship further.[49] So all Fyodor could do, was to study her during the meals, when she was usually worn out by the work in a lawyer's office, and barely speaking. He was highly conscious of his intense perception of her, and how, in her absence, 'the automatic repetitions of the disintegrating image were aimed at the destruction of that image'.[50] His survey is fairly complete and he almost suffered from the beauty that seemed inaccessible at first: 'Her pale hair which radiantly and imperceptibly merged into the sunny air around her head, the light blue vein on her temple, another on her long, tender neck, her delicate hand, her sharp elbow, the narrowness of her hips and the peculiar forward slant of her graceful body.'[51] These were the elements that made up his mental image of her, which, by necessity, is also the reader's.

Looking back over the last two chapters, one could say that both affectionate and antipathetic characterization give rise to a wealth of description. When one compares the portraits, one is struck by certain recurrent traits: slanted eyes, similar hair-styles, radiance. But description and characterization is never stereotyped in Nabokov's novels, such minor recurrences play a less important part when one considers the whole beings with their idiosyncrasies, their manners of speech, and their effect on the other characters. The differences between the types of Mary and Martha Dreyer, or between Mrs. Luzhin and Zina Mertz could not be greater, but nevertheless one notices certain similarities in their pictures. If it were not incompatible with the approach we have chosen, one could say that the basis of these variations is Nabokov's image of women in love.

[48] The narrator in *Pnin* has his own opinion on this subject: 'Some people—and I am one of them—hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam' (*Pnin,* p. 22).

[49] Zina's widowed mother had married again and Shchyogolev was an impossible stepfather. Cf. above, pp. 46–47.

[50] *The Gift,* pp. 171–72.

[51] *The Gift,* p. 171.

5. Nymphets and Demons

'The science of nympholepsy is a precise science.'[1]

A further group of girls can be differentiated by the depravity of their character. The blending of childishness, vulgarity, and cunning makes them stand in opposition to the girls of Nabokov's earlier novels that we have seen above. The touch of evil is idiosyncratic to Margot in *Laughter in the Dark* and to Lolita and this strangely heightens their appeal. Their charm proves to be the undoing of their victims (appearing as lecherous pursuers). Ada is again a different type: the features of many previous creations are reflected in her portrait. Outwardly these heroines are even more beautiful than those preceding them. Their character is of a demonic quality, which is fatal for their blind lovers, who tend to overlook this deficiency. Margot, Lolita, and Ada are frequently unfaithful to their lovers and thus torture them playfully.

Margot was young and dangerous and easily succeeded in ruining and finally killing her protector (Albinus Kretschmar). He first met her at the 'Argus' cinema, where she worked as an usherette (but dreamt of becoming a filmstar): 'She was holding one hand in the pocket of her short embroidered apron and her black frock fitted her very tightly about the arms and bosom. He stared at her face almost in dread. It was a pale, sulky, painfully beautiful face. He guessed her age to be about eighteen.'[2] Further characteristics are scattered in the course of the novel: sleek black hair, long Luini-esque eyes[3], glistening, often painted lips, large white teeth, dimples on her cheeks, blue-veined arms, a slim, downy back, and girlish hips. Albinus fell hopelessly in love with her, broke up his family, neglected his work, and changed his life completely to be able to enjoy her company.

The narrator provides some snapshots of her from the couple's first trip to the sea-side:

'Margot lay spread-eagled on the platinum sand, her limbs a rich honey-brown, and a thin rubber belt relieving the black of her bathing-suit: the perfect sea-side poster. Lying alongside of her, Albinus propped up his cheek and looked with endless delight at the oily gloss of her closed eyelids and at her freshly made-up

[1] *Lolita*, p. 131.
[2] *Laughter in the Dark*, p. 14.
[3] Bernardino Luini, an Italian painter (1480?–1533?).

mouth. Her wet dark hair was thrown back from her round forehead and grains of sand glittered in her little ears. If you looked very close, there was an iridescent sheen in the pits of her brown polished shoulders. The close-fitting seal-like black thing she had on was much too short to be true.'[4]

This close-up in the heat of the Mediterranean sun reveals Margot motionless, the perfect object for Albinus' roving eyes.—Later, in the villa where they were staying, she peeled off her black skin 'snake-like'[5], but this does not give rise to further description. Margot is the first fictive girl in Nabokov's fiction with a pronounced liking for the dishabille[6], which is probably the effect of 'the blissful animal warmth of her body'[7], noticed by both her lovers, Rex, whom she adored and preferred to Albinus, whom she exploited, and put up with.

Lolita

A great deal has been written about the socio-moral implications of *Lolita* and it is unnecessary to add to it. I should like to adhere to the perspective taken above, although this seems to be more difficult when one deals with Nabokov's later nymphets (Lolita and Ada), as they are examined visually throughout. Hardly a detail of their fictive life is left unrepresented in the narrative. We notice the perfection of a process that was built up over decades: an orgy of description, total characterization, as a declaration of love, as a vehicle for the narrator's enthusiasm. Humbert's ambition was to create Lolita's picture in as life-like a way as possible, but he came to the conclusion that he ultimately was unable to do so: 'In mid-composition, however, I realized that I could not parade living Lolita.'[8] The dimension that is most imperfectly rendered in the novel is no doubt movement. So it seems that the cinema would have been

[4] *Laughter in the Dark,* p. 72.

[5] Margot is often compared to reptiles (pp. 51, 74, 105, 126).

[6] This carelessness proved dangerous when they went dancing one night. A young man managed to paw her in the garden behind the casino, but she escaped in time (pp. 75–76). Lolita and Ada were similarly imprudent (cf. below: 'Omission of Panties').

[7] *Laughter in the Dark,* p. 37. The same characteristic was also given to Lolita and Ada and it is part of their nymphet-demon charm.

[8] *Lolita,* p. 310.

a more appropriate medium for capturing her charm.[9] Humbert regrets not having filmed the girl, but his account tries to make up for this.

His perception of her was so intense that he attained 'a beggar's bliss' immediately when he first saw her in a two-piece bathing suit. She appealed to all his senses; but let us not forget that in the end it was Lolita who seduced Humbert. He declared that the purpose of his descriptions was to separate his impressions of the nymphet and of the demon in Lolita: 'I am trying to describe these things not to re-live them in my present boundless misery[10], but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love. The beastly and the beautiful merged at one point and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why?'[11] Because his emotion is too strong? Or because beauty and beast are melted to perfection in Lolita? It will be Humbert's tragedy to find out that the two masks are inseparable, and that ecstasy and suffering are in store for him.

Lolita is surveyed meticulously; she is one of the few fictive bodies to materialize almost completely, to become a myth. Humbert lovingly treasured the measurements of her body (and mind), they are the limits and extent of his adoration, taken by spiteful Charlotte Haze ('adding an inch here, a pound there'):

> 'Hip girth, twenty-nine inches;
> thigh girth (just below the gluteal sulcus), seventeen;
> calf girth and neck circumference, twenty-seven;
> stature, fifty-seven inches;
> weight, seventy-eight pounds;
> figure, linear;
> intelligence quotient, 121;
> vermiform appendix present, thank God.'[12]

Lolita is the reincarnation of Humbert's first love (Annabel), when he himself was a boy. His initial impression of Lolita was a shock of recognition, a *déjà-vu* experience that left him with 'knees that were like reflections of knees in rippling water and lips like sand'[13]; these meta-

[9] *Lolita* has served as material for two films so far. Nabokov published his screenplay for Stanley Kubrick's version in 1974.
[10] Humbert Humbert is in prison while writing *Lolita*.
[11] *Lolita*, p. 137.
[12] *Lolita*, p. 109.
[13] *Lolita*, p. 42.

phors indicate his 'princedom by the sea'[14], as further related images show clearly; 'a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses. It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair'.[15] Already in this first portrait we note a swell of adjectives (Humbert's inventiveness is immense in this field as we shall see later on). Being an experienced voyeur, he recognized more disturbing details: her kerchiefed juvenile breasts, a dark-brown mole on her side, her lovely indrawn abdomen, those puerile hips. The characteristics that Humbert Humbert most often praised are Lolita's auburn hair, her gray eyes, her agile limbs, and the special texture and tan of her skin.

Blue sulks and rosy mirths

The exact 'portion of heaven and hell'[16] is mirrored on Lolita's face. Humbert described its extraordinary russet radiance in happy moments and many a wry face and rude word when this impossible daughter was displeased ('Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat'[17]). She is compared to Botticelli's russet Venus—'the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty'[18]. Humbert wrote several poems for Lolita: 'A poet *à mes heures,* I composed a madrigal to the soot-black lashes of her pale-gray vacant eyes, to the five asymmetrical freckles of her bobbed nose, to the blond down of her brown limbs; but I tore it up and cannot recall it today.'[19] Constant description of the same object obviously leads to a certain amount of redundancy or even self-citation. This is an organizing principle in the narrative. Lolita's eyes, for instance, are in turns: '*yeux battus*' with 'plumbaceous umbrae under her eyes'[20], 'chinesed' because her temple-skins were pulled back on both sides and

[14] There are many allusions to Poe in *Lolita.*
[15] *Lolita,* p. 41.
[16] *Lolita,* p. 137.
[17] *Lolita,* p. 150.
[18] *Lolita.* p. 272.
[19] *Lolita,* p. 46. Cf. also the poem, pp. 258–59.
[20] *Lolita,* p. 113.

kissed by avid Humbert[21], they are 'heartless and vaporous'[22], 'wide-set, clouded-glass gray and slightly bloodshot'[23], 'her eyes were *vair*[24], and never closed when I kissed her'[25], sighs Humbert in his poem. At their last meeting they were 'washed-out and strangely spectacled'[26], which indicates the change that made Lolita a woman and the wife of another man.

On their first trip after Lolita's summer camp, widowed Humbert and Lolita stopped for the night at 'The Enchanted Hunters' hotel. Tired Lo and anxious Hum were to share the room:

> '"Are we to sleep in *one* room?" said Lo, her features working in that dynamic way they did—not cross or disgusted (though plain on the brink of it) but just dynamic—when she wanted to load a question with violent significance.'

Humbert's proposal to act as a father for all 'pratical purposes' and his trying to save the situation were cut short by his protégée:

> '"We are not rich, and while we travel, we shall be obliged—we shall be a good deal thrown together. Two people sharing one room, inevitably enter into a kind—how shall I say—a kind."
>
> "The word is incest," said Lo—and walked into the closet, walked out again with a young golden giggle . . .'[27]

Cheerfulness and ill-temper were close together, capricious Lolita was exuberant in both moods. When the sulky, presumptuous, and demonic girl seduced Humbert, she wanted to have it in her way as always; she refused his well-meant preliminaries rudely: '"Lay-off, will you," she said with a twangy whine, hastily removing her brown shoulder from my lips.'[28] She allowed only kisses on the mouth or the act of love—everything else was either 'romantic slosh' or 'abnormal'[29], which made Humbert wonder about juvenile mores and insist on a confession about the goings-on at the summer camp. Her facial contortions were even more telling than her report:

[21] *Lolita,* p. 194.
[22] *Lolita,* p. 205.
[23] *Lolita,* pp. 205–6.
[24] The colour of Russian squirrel fur.
[25] *Lolita,* p. 258.
[26] *Lolita,* p. 264.
[27] *Lolita,* p. 121.
[28] *Lolita,* p. 135.
[29] Ibid.

'Her voluble but disjointed account was accompanied by many a droll *moue*. As I think I have already observed, I especially remember one wry face on an "ugh!" basis: jellymouth distended sideways and eyes rolled up in a routine blend of comic disgust, resignation and tolerance for young frailty."[30]

Much later, at Beardsley, Humbert's jealousy caused a row between them which paved the way for their definitive separation. The language that Lolita's face spoke was, again, most clear: 'She said she loathed me. She made monstrous faces at me, inflating her cheeks and producing a diabolical plopping sound.'[31]

Excruciatingly desirable from head to foot—Lolita the bobby-soxer

Humbert Humbert used many different techniques to recreate 'the body of some immortal daemon disguised as a female child'[32]: physical description, emotive imagery, poetry, diary, kisses, comparison with other girls, voyeurism, dreams and sexual phantasies. He never tired of visualizing his enchanted prey, her movements provoked his desire and ecstasy. He virtually praised every detail of her body (and his lust and love for it), in a hymn that is his declaration of love and the apotheosis of Lolita's body. From her mysterious features to 'the yellowish soles of her long toed feet' nothing was overlooked: the sticky hot neck, the aura of her bare shoulders, the armpits with their young down; Lolita's breasts showed especially well in her Sunday dress: 'Her little doves seem well formed already. Precocious pet!'[33] Her lover was very fond of her still unflared hips, her 'shameless innocent shanks and round bottom'[34], her 'agile, giggling, sunny or blond legs'[35], which, in her mother's view, were too often exposed. 'Dolores Haze, *ne montrez pas vos zhambes*'[36], was her well-meant admonition, but to no avail . . . To complete this cursory inspection of the nymphet's exciting body, one might mention her boy-knees, 'the gooseberry fuzz of her shin'[37], her monkeyish feet, and her

[30] *Lolita*, pp. 137–38.
[31] *Lolita*, p. 207.
[32] *Lolita*, p. 141.
[33] *Lolita*, p. 51.
[34] *Lolita*, p. 62.
[35] *Lolita*, pp. 57, 62, 68.
[36] *Lolita*, p. 46.
[37] *Lolita*, p. 47.

big toes. There are three very important manifestations that are intrinsic to Lolita's body, appealing to Humbert's olfactory and tactile senses: its unique fragrance, its delicate down, and a demonic warmth.

The famous seduction scene was preceded by Humbert's preparations and imaginations about how to enjoy his darling with impunity. His scheme was to protect the innocence of his prey by giving her sleeping-pills. His impatience made him visualize the scene in advance. It is presented with the liberty common to dreams and sexual phantasies:

> 'Naked, except for one sock and her charm bracelet, spread-eagled on the bed where my philtre had felled her—so I fore-glimpsed her; her honey-brown body, with the white negative image of a rudimentary swimsuit patterned against her tan, presented to me its pale breastbuds; in the rosy lamplight, a little pubic floss glistened on its plump hillock.'[38]

Reality was quite different, however: Lolita wore an old nightgown and the pills did not work. She woke up at every approach he made, and Humbert spent a most uncomfortable and restless night, with Lolita occupying most of the double-bed.

Description does not stop at the outside of the body, however; in some cases the girl becomes even transparent. Humbert wondered at the capacity of his companion's 'lovely prismatic entrails'[39], which, as soon as they had digested a preliminary sundae, were looking forward to a big meal. His love knew no limits and their *ménage* provided some satisfaction for Humbert later on:

> 'How sweet it was to bring that coffee to her, and then deny it until she had done her morning duty. And I was such a thoughtful friend, such a passionate father, such a good paediatrician, attending to all the wants of my little auburn brunette's body! My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys.'[40]

These were strange kisses indeed, but proof that the fictive body was investigated with such great power of penetration that even internal areas could be explored.

[38] *Lolita,* p. 127.
[39] *Lolita,* p. 118.
[40] *Lolita,* p. 167.

Movement was important for Humbert Humbert's method of evading the authorities, as well as for Lolita, who was a lively, precocious girl. Her motions express her feelings perhaps more adequately than her school slang and teenager lore. Great stress is laid on girlish movements (fidgeting, rope-jumping, romping, wriggling, and squirming etc.). If the description of the girl became almost synonymous with kisses, Lolita's movements indicated the rhythm of Humbert's visual ecstasies or caused his affliction. These were the moves of a prisoner because they were only permitted if propitious to Humbert's designs and absolutely forbidden if disadvantageous. Quite appropriately Humbert compared himself to a spider ('Humbert the Wounded Spider'[41]), to a cuttlefish ('my tentacles moved towards her again'[42]), and to a predator 'that prefers a moving prey to a motionless one'[43]. A certain dreamy awkwardness was typical for Lo's movements, but also downright impudence and thoughtlessness. Lolita's behaviour in the car (cranking down the windows, fidgeting, slamming and reslamming the door, leaning out, and playing with the hand-brake), at the telephone, and her graceful bicycle movements were cause of joy and anguish on Humbert's side. He calls her a 'sportive lassie' and takes delight in her activities: 'She preferred acting to swimming and swimming to tennis.'[44] Her protector's preferences were exactly reversed and it was above all her tennis that made havoc of Humbert's composure.

A good player in his prime, but a hopeless teacher, Humbert Humbert tried in vain to teach his child to play tennis. Then he had her take expensive lessons with a famous coach. Still later, in her chance games with a coeval, he was an avid spectator, 'comparing the bodies in motion'[45] and bringing them drinks from the hotel. The enchantment was caused by the show of 'apricot-coloured limbs' in motion and by her tennis togs, 'the white wide little-boy shorts, the slender waist, the apricot midriff, the white breast-kerchief whose ribbons went up and encircled her neck to end behind in a dangling knot leaving bare her gaspingly young and adorable apricot shoulder blades with that pubescence and those lovely

[41] *Lolita*, p. 56.
[42] *Lolita*, p. 132.
[43] *Lolita*, p. 44.
[44] *Lolita*, p. 234.
[45] *Lolita*, p. 164.

gentle bones, and the smooth, downward-tapering back'.[46] Her moves were registered in relation to the lines. Humbert noticed her improvements with pride, praised the exquisite clarity of all her movements, her perfect imitation of 'top-notch tennis', her service which was direct and fast, but easy to return, her forehand and backhand drives, half-volleys, and overhead smashes and the velocity of her nimble, vivid, white-shod feet. The following detail in her game was high reward for the indefatigable trainer's efforts: 'She was picking up a ball—in the continental foot-racket way which was one of the few nice things I had taught her—and smiled—she smiled at me!'[47] A fake telephone call from Humbert's enemy[48] necessitated his absence from the court for a few minutes. When he came back, Lolita was engaged in a double with some strangers. From far away Lolita's harmonious movements stood out clearly against those of the rest of the party: 'She moved like a fair angel among three horrible Boschian cripples.'[49]

Ada

The last major portrait of a female character in Nabokov's novels is the one of Ada, the most glamorous and endearing girl he has created so far. Her name is the title of a highly enjoyable love-story which 'possesses an aspect prohibited by law'[50]. In its first part, it is the account of the precocious gropings and related memories of a girl (Ada) and a boy (Van), who have the same father (Demon Veen!) but different mothers (Aqua and Marina are sisters). The pattern of their separations and reunions, their pranks and banter, the indulgement in their respective activities and their passionate love-making are some of the topics of 'an ample and delightful chronicle', as Nabokov calls it himself on the last page of the novel.[51]

Van wrote a whole encyclopedia of Ada's young charms; an entire chapter is devoted to a systematical description of her. This is a complete

[46] *Lolita,* pp. 232–33.
[47] *Lolita,* p. 236.
[48] Clare Quilty.
[49] *Lolita,* p. 237.
[50] *Ada,* p. 460.
[51] This passage (*Ada,* pp. 460–61) is an excellent description of the novel.

break in the narrative and has the form of a remembered photograph.[52] On first seeing her, he noticed her dark hair, her white frock, her black jacket, and the white bow in her long hair. Her nails were always bitten and therefore she hid them; she was pale-thighed and pale-armed and had young hips like Lolita. Their love-affair moved slowly at first, then very fast, once curiosity had overcome the restraints of consanguinity. Van's ravishment grew, kindled by 'her pale, voluptuous, impermissible skin, her hair, her angular movements, her gazelle-grass odor, the black stare of her wideset eyes, the rustic nudity under her dress'.[53] This is a first sum of her attractions; their near-relationship seemed to forbid any thoughts of affection between them at the beginning. Their kinship was one of the reasons for their long separations, during which their mutual attraction was never in danger.

Her charms proved irresistible. Her usual carelessness concerning underwear was the children's undoing[54] when they were climbing the roof in their investigation of Ardis Manor from top to bottom and Van was second to climb through the skylight, and thus saw what he had never seen before . . . A similarly disconcerting sight was Ada's morning wash next day, 'the soft woggle of her budbreasts in profile' was not only admired by inquisitive Van, but also by inanimate objects.[55] But it was only after the disappearance of certain obstacles (a mask, a veil, 'some pudibond screen'[56]) that Van was able to describe her more fully. Their natural timidity was overcome by innumerable kisses, 'daily butterfly kisses on that hair, on that neck'[57], and elsewhere. He 'learned' her face, described and defined her eyes, and discovered her hands. ('She had on the back of her left hand the same small brown spot that marked his right one'[58]—is this a sign of perfect symmetry or the whim of heredity?)

[52] *Ada*, pp. 169–72.
[53] *Ada*, p. 52.
[54] *Ada*, pp. 52–53. See also below 'Omission of Panties'.
[55] *Ada*, p. 53.
[56] *Ada*, p. 83.
[57] *Ada*, p. 82.
[58] *Ada*, p. 85. There is a mirror-symmetry of birthmarks between Ada and Van: 'The right instep and the back of her left hand bore the same small not over-conspicuous but indelible and sacred birthmark, with which nature had signed his right hand and left foot' (*Ada*, p. 171). But the whim of nature does not stop there. After their longest separation, Van noticed another symmetrical detail: 'He noted that her smile revealed a gold-capped upper premolar; he had a similar one on the other side of his mouth' (*Ada*, p. 437).

Her hair caused a climax of adoration when they were sunbathing:

> 'Her long straight hair that seemed of a uniform bluish-black in the shade now revealed, in the gem-like sun, strains of deep auburn alternating with dark amber in lanky strands which clothed her hollowed cheek or were gracefully cleft by her raised ivory shoulder. The texture, gloss and odor of those brown silks had once inflamed his senses at the very beginning of that fatal summer, and continued to act upon him, strongly and poignantly, long after his young excitement had found in her other sources of incurable bliss.'[59]

The fillet of black velvet binding her hair reminds one of such earlier heroines as Tamara, Mary, Lolita, and others who wore similar hair-styles. Ada's hair was still vividly recalled by her lover decades later:

> 'At ninety, Van remembered his first fall from a horse with scarcely less breathlessness of thought than that first time she had bent over him and he had possessed her hair. It tickled his legs, it crept into his crotch, it spread all over his palpitating belly.'[60]

These passages of absolute sensuality parallel the infatuation of certain characters with the hair of their respective loves in previous novels. The poignancy of description shows the author's handling of a theme at the peak of its possibilities. The retrospective point of view heightens its pathetic charm.

After four years of separation the lovers met again. The interval did not count for them, it seems as if it did not exist, they resumed their affair where it was abandoned. Van compared old and new impressions which is an activity that annihilated the interval.[61] The juxtaposition of the two images was easy for Van as he had an affective and photographic memory. It was only after a certain time, however, that Van was able to complete and arrange his partial glimpses, when both were on 'a willow islet' in the middle of the huge family estate. The itinerary of description follows the by now well-known tracks of earlier explorers. He started on her face, then scanned unrestrainedly her adolescent body, indicating a downward movement. He concentrated on her neck, which 'had been, and remained, his most delicate, most poignant delight, especially when she let her hair flow freely, and the warm, white, adorable skin showed through in chance separations of glossy black strands'.[62]

[59] *Ada*, p. 113.
[60] Ibid.
[61] In a similar way as described above in 'Recurrences', p. 38.
[62] *Ada*, p. 170.

Van caressed visually (and tactually) her shoulders, her breasts. 'He recognized the familiar, individual, beautiful intake of her flat young abdomen, its wonderful "play", the frank and eager expression of the oblique muscles and the "smile" of her navel—to borrow from the vocabulary of the belly dancer's art.'[63] The survey was concluded where one would not expect it: 'Her lovely strong legs had, maybe, grown longer but they still preserved the sleek pallor and suppleness of her nymphet years. She could still suck her big toe.'[64] After a brief spell of happiness the couple did not meet for many years. Ada, in the meantime, was married to an Arizonian cattle-breeder.

In their fifties, Van had become a philosopher of time and life and Ada an ageing lady. Still later, they were changed considerably when they met again after so many years.[65] The shock of recognition and the feeling of humiliation echoes the much earlier tribulations of the incestuous youths. A much more powerful veil was woven by the texture of time ('Fate's surgery'[66] had worked on both of them) and this hindered at first a spontaneous renaissance of their love. The final separation had lasted seventeen years and it prevented a gradual and mutual adjustment of their changed ways and appearances. Van could not help noticing certain changes from his remembered image of Ada, such as 'the unfamiliar stateliness of her body, her hair bobbed page-boy fashion and dyed a brilliant bronze. Her neck and hands were as delicately pale as ever but showed unfamiliar fibres and raised veins'.[67] Lavish use of cosmetics, different eyes and a gold-cupped upper tooth were the more obvious changes in her face. The metamorphosis from nymphet to ripe woman and elderly lady is reproduced clearly in Van's mind. His affection triumphed after the overcoming of the shock of surprise:

> 'The metallic sheen of her fringe distressed him less than the velvet gown, full skirted, square-shouldered, of well-below-the-calf-length, with hip-padding which was supposed both to diminish the waist and disguise by amplification the now buxom pelvis. Nothing remained of her gangling grace, and the new mellowness, and the velvet stuff, had an irritatingly dignified air of obstacle and defense. He loved her much too tenderly, much too irrevocably, to be unduly depressed by sexual misgivings; but his senses certainly remained stirless . . .'[68]

[63] *Ada*, p. 170.
[64] *Ada*, p. 171.
[65] After Ada's husband had died.
[66] *Ada*, p. 438.
[67] *Ada*, p. 437.
[68] *Ada*, pp. 437–38.

The resurrected love had outlived Ada's marriage to another man, Van's frequent infidelities, the impediments of their near-relationship, the thieveries of time, and finally the 'ravage and outrage of age'[69]. Of course, naturalness, grace, and innocence were past. The present and the future will only be a shadow of their past. The flimsy frocks were replaced by an expensive and forbidding garment, her haircut was radically different, and the dyeing of the hair from the original auburn to a dull brown made it lose its almost tactile life and its irresistible appeal. But in Van's eyes the greatest blemish must have been her increased waistline ('the now buxom pelvis' as opposed to her young hips of long ago). Yet, with only a few exceptions, Van decided to be true to her: 'He discovered that a touch of subtle sport could be derived from constantly fighting temptation while constantly dreaming of somehow, sometime, somewhere, yielding to it.'[70] But the temptations diminished in frequency[71], as well as in ardour, and the same happened to his relations with still cooperative Ada.

[69] *Ada*, p. 439.
[70] *Ada*, p. 450.
[71] 'The successive secretaries he engaged got plainer and plainer (culminating in a coconut-haired female with a horse mouth who wrote love notes to Ada)' (*Ada*, p. 450).

PART THREE

REQUISITES: SIGNS AND SIGNIFICANCE

'. . . and I must not be overexplicit;
this is why I find laughable the empty dream
about readers, and body, and glory.'
(V. Nabokov, 'Fame')

'. . . the readers are restless tonight.'
(V. Nabokov, *Ada*)

1. Clothes

'To see her dress lying there, more like air than a dress.'[1]

Lolita's blue jeans and shorts, Ada's déshabillés, Margot's bathing suits, Pnin's and Person's dreadful costumes, Luzhin's unsophisticated wardrobe and the dandies'[2] mannerisms of dressing—all this is part of a variegated theme in Nabokov's novels. Description is both a clothing and a revealing of the body; and the personality is doubly hidden in body and clothes. There is a constant interplay between these two areas of intimacy, by which the character is accentuated or masked; there are bodies of which the message is easily read and others which do not allow of any interpretation at all.

In this perspective, not only the wearing of clothes is of interest, but also the loss and absence of them. In a world of voyeurs and seductresses every inch of the body that is clothed or undressed may be of great consequence. Décolletés and déshabillés are coolly displayed, at once noticed by the prey, and the person wearing the provocative garment is duly categorized. But even the dress can be transparent for the experienced eye ('the sexual eye'[3] as it is called in *Transparent Things*). Clothing can thus be seen as a screen which enhances the delights of voyeurism, in that special function giving wings to the observing artist's imagination, and in this way it may help to create works of art.

For some characters garments are like a second skin, an extension of their self. Others, who are endowed with a more delicate epidermis, feel ill at ease in their clothes. In the relations between characters, dresses can be impediments, obstacles forbidding total knowledge of the partner's body, which, for instance, Humbert hopes to find by divestment.

The functions of clothing are manifold: it is a means of adapting to the climatic conditions, a protection of the body, the expression of adherence to, or repulsion of, certain social conventions, or a way to hide an ugly body. Clothing is also an ornament of the body, it may serve the purpose of sexual allurement and it can become travesty or a fetish.[4]

[1] Nikolai Gogol, *Diary of a Madman,* (11 November).
[2] Martin Edelweiss, Sebastian Knight, and the Veens.
[3] *Transparent Things,* p. 34.
[4] Garments can assume the total essence of the owner for the adorer. They are then souvenirs or relics in impossible or one-sided relationship.

In Nabokov's fiction, material, style, and colours of clothes are usually described scrupulously, as well as the short-lived fads and fashions, or the oddities of an occasional freak. The narrator's attention is often devoted to jewelry, slippers, and ties; these are 'non-garments' so to speak, but they are sometimes given great significance in the narrative.

As virtually all the narrators in Nabokov's novels are of the male sex, it seems natural that much of their interest is focused on the female body, its wrappings and accessories. This intense preoccupation (perception, memorizing, and grouping of data) gives life to the objects of description, and sometimes also indirectly to the narrator. We cannot say, however, that only girls and women are depicted extensively. There are quite a few Nabokov novels in which the interest in males is predominant.[5]

Fashions and Necessities

Having concentrated on the female body and its manifestations in the previous chapters, I should now like to restore the balance somewhat by considering men's costumes here. The inevitable suits and ties provide a theme that is highly diversified and calls for some extension. Evolutions of wardrobes, swapping of clothes and the problem of matching colours play an important part in Nabokov's fashions. There are possible and impossible shades for a man's suit. Classical gray is worn by several Nabokov characters; brown is, however, out of the question for a gentleman. Both Pnin and Person disobey this rule and make an unfavourable impression on the people whom they meet.

When Pnin set out by train to deliver a Friday evening lecture at the Cremona Women's Club, he wore a flannel suit of an unknown colour (he was still wearing his tweed coat), sloppy socks of scarlet wool 'with lilac lozenges', and the conservative, black, very expensive oxfords which were his pride. The fifty dollars that he received for this lecture were exclusively spent on a new brown suit[6], which he donned for the first time when he was expecting the visit of his ex-wife, Liza Wind. She, however, only noticed his set of new teeth. The aim of her call was to extract some pocket money for her son Victor, then

[5] *Despair, Sebastian Knight, Pnin,* and *Pale Fire.*
[6] *Pnin,* p. 44.

attending an expensive boarding school. She found that Pnin's salary was more than enough for his 'microscopic needs'[7] and that he could well afford to contribute to the boy's upkeep. As he was helping her into her coat after too brief a stop, she remarked casually, 'you know, Timofey, this brown suit of yours is a mistake: a gentleman does not wear brown'.[8]

Changing fashions could not greatly impress Pnin; his professorial garb was composed according to his own taste. His eccentricity was stressed by the way in which he acclimatized to the new surroundings, not quite catching the intricacies of its codes. The transformation from the traditional, prim European habits of dressing to bold, cheerful American attire and demeanour was, however, optimistically undertaken. This implied far-reaching changes: 'Prior to the nineteen-forties, during the staid European era of his life, he had always worn long underwear, its terminals tucked into the tops of neat silk socks, which were clocked, soberly coloured, and held up on his cotton-clad calves by garters.'[9] To show bits of these solidly wrapped legs would have been as unthinkable to Pnin as going around without collar and tie. Starting a new life in America meant adapting to a new style of dressing among other changes: 'All this underwent a change in the heady atmosphere of the New World. Nowadays, at fifty-two, he was crazy about sun-bathing, wore sport shirts and slacks, and when crossing his legs would carefully, deliberately, brazenly display a tremendous stretch of bare shin.'[10] Pnin is even seen in Bermuda shorts later on.

An anachronism that made the transition from Europe to America was resurrected on the occasion of Pnin's party, an old 'sybaritic smoking jacket of blue silk, with tasselled belt and satin lapels, won at an *émigré* charity bazaar in Paris twenty years ago—how time flies! This jacket he wore with a pair of old tuxedo trousers, likewise of European origin.'[11] Thus, accoutred like a circus director, Pnin made last culinary preparations, received his guests, and talked throughout the evening.

[7] *Pnin,* p. 46.

[8] *Pnin,* p. 48. This was one of the awful experiences that constitute a chain of Pninian blunders and mortifications in the book (he had the wrong paper in his pocket on the way to Cremona and was on the wrong train; he constantly confused the names of two colleagues; he had to overcome the shock of being dismissed from the faculty after his party).

[9] *Pnin,* p. 7.

[10] Ibid.

[11] *Pnin,* pp. 126–27.

Franz Bubendorf is another character whose way of life changes considerably in the course of *King, Queen, Knave*. When he came to live in Berlin from the provinces, his chances were affected in a favourable manner. Dreyer, who was the owner of a large department store, his uncle and later rival[12], declared that if Franz wanted to work at the store, he would need 'a decent suit, shirts, soft collars, ties, all kinds of things'.[13] As time passed, Franz got his job, a fancy toilette, a room, and a mistress, which was all that he craved for. At the beginning of his stay in Berlin he was fascinated by the luxuriousness of the clothes that passers-by wore:

> 'Only one thing really told him he was in the metropolis: some strollers wore marvelous clothes! For instance, plus-fours, very baggy below the knee, so as to make the wool-stockinged shin look handsomely slender. That particular style he had never seen before, though boys in his hometown also wore knickerbockers. Then there was the high-class fop in a double-breasted jacket, very wide in the shoulders, and ultra-tight around the hips, and with incredibly elephantine trouser legs the tremendous cuffs of which practically concealed his shoes. The hats, too, were splendid, and the flamboyant ties; and the girls, the girls. Kind Dreyer!'[14]

All this elegance had a powerful effect on Franz, who diligently started his new life by gradually trying to copy this splendour. Franz's job accelerated his initiation into metropolitan fashions.

Dreyer himself gave Franz a first lesson in sales-techniques one evening. He took him to D*A*N*D*Y, his department store, without telling him where they were going. The shop had ten festively lit display windows. In passing, Franz noticed ties, socks and shirts, 'an orgy of glossy footwear, a Fata Morgana of coats, a graceful paradise of sports articles'.[15]

Lesson One was about the selling of neckties. Dreyer probably thought that whoever could sell a tie properly could sell anything else, too. Uncle and nephew played salesman and customer and swapped roles after a certain time. Dreyer's teaching was not based on experience, but 'on inutile imagination'.[16] Franz had to ask for a simple blue tie first,

[12] When Franz and Martha, his aunt, fell in love with each other. The tension of the book relies on the uncertainty about whether he would find out that his wife and nephew betrayed him.

[13] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 34.

[14] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 45.

[15] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 68. The sports department was the section in which Franz worked at the beginning of his apprenticeship.

[16] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 70.

whereas Dreyer was displaying 'an expensive magenta-and-black tie on his hand and holding it away a little as if admiring it himself in the capacity of an independent artist'.[17] The further advice that Franz was given was supposed to prove infallible if remembered correctly:

> 'Here, take this one. Now knot it in your hand. Wait, wait—don't worry it like that. Swing it around your finger. Thus! Remember the slightest delay in the rhythm costs you a moment of the customer's attention. Hypnotize him with the flip of the tie you display. You must make it *bloom* before the idiot's eyes. No, that's not a knot, that's some kind of tumor. Watch. Hold your hand straight. Let's try this expensive vampire red.'[18]

If the idiot still does not feel inclined to buy, Dreyer recommends to keep pushing it in his 'stupid face', to watch his eyes to see whether he 'begins to frown and clear his damned throat'[19], then one might consider giving him what he had asked for at the beginning, but one should still choose the most expensive among the plainer ties, smiling disdainfully at the customer's lack of taste. This must always be followed by the well-known inquiry wether the customer needs anything else.

Then came advanced training; Franz was taught by Dreyer who was in an exuberant mood:

> 'He started to finger the silks in the boxes, and to instruct Franz how to remember ties by touch and tint, how to develop, in other words (lost on Franz), a chromatic and tactile memory, how to eradicate from one's artistic and commercial consciousness styles and specimens that had been sold out—so as to make room for new ones in one's mind, and how to determine the price in marks immediately and then add the pfennigs from the tag.'[20]

Dreyer concluded his tuition by playing all sorts of customers:

> 'Several times he jumped off the counter, gesticulating grotesquely, impersonating a customer irritated by everything he was shown; the brute who objected to his being told the price before he had asked for it; and the saint to whom price was no object; also an old lady buying a tie for her grandson, a fireman at Potsdam; or a foreigner unable to express anything comprehensible—a Frenchman who wants a *cravate,* an Italian who demands a *cravatta,* a Russian who pleads gently for a *galstook.*'[21]

[17] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 70.
[18] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 71.
[19] Ibid.
[20] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 72.
[21] Ibid. This fireman is a typical example of the invention of characters that in no way have a function in the novel; it is a device that Gogol used very often.

Mr Piffke and his colleagues initiated Franz into the 'minor mysteries of salesmanship'[22] and he was, with a little help, able to provide his first customer with a ball for his dog. He soon got accustomed to his work at the emporium and he learnt quite a few things on the subject of fashions which he was able to adapt for himself.

Another source for Franz's 'sentimental education' were the Dreyers themselves. He became a permanent guest in their house. Martha subtly and cunningly invested her beau with all that he needed and taught him to behave in society. Franz, by seizing the possibilities that were offered to him, managed to please both the Dreyers, but for entirely different reasons.

However, in the long run all this coaching proved to be too much for Franz, who lost his nerves. Instead of Dreyer, it was Martha who died at the end; perhaps she felt that Franz was not strong enough to kill her husband. Just before this final section of the novel, Franz realized his old dream of purchasing fashionable plus-fours, a project that the Dreyers would not have appreciated.

Omission of Panties

Humbert Humbert observed many things that would escape a prim reader's notice. He was hypersensitive to the manifestations of femininity and nymphetry. His first wife's last action in their flat had a touch of finality and deliverance and indicates a theme that will be important later in the novel: 'Valechka took down with a flourish her pink panties from the clothes-line above the tub.'[23] 'With a flourish' because her new lover was present, 'turning tactfully away.' The hideous colour of the garment was no doubt obnoxious to Humbert, as was the improper habit of drying clothes in the bathroom. Valechka's vehement movement might also be explained by her remembrance of a certain omission in her underwear, committed in the rush of her preparations to leave the house. The theme is less equivocal when one considers Lolita or Ada; there it is either negligence or impudence that leads to excesses of this sort.

Later, on more pleasant occasions, Humbert Humbert could not be expected to overlook Lolita's brazen carelessness in this respect. When he

[22] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 78.
[23] *Lolita,* p. 31.

bought a 'trousseau' for his darling, some disturbing phantasies tormented the customer; 'what little girl would not like to whirl in a circular skirt and scanties?'.[24] These are visions of some 'Lolita' moving in controlled motion, skating or dancing. This idea was followed by a still deeper entanglement in problems of investiture: 'I had next great fun with all kinds of shorts and briefs—phantom little Lolitas dancing, falling, daisying all over the counter.'[25] And again the evocative power of the garments was enhanced when they were imagined in connection with Lolita's movements. Humbert involuntarily saw Lolita's body already draped by the things that he was going to buy. Humbert had to top these frolics with the purchase of a plain, sober cotton pyjama for himself to cover his bewilderment, to cool himself down, and to reassure the saleswomen, whose eyebrows had risen considerably during the bargain.

Most of the things that Humbert Humbert bought for Lolita were a success. She was 'the ideal consumer'[26] and 'any wearable purchase worked wonders with her'.[27] But she wore slips only reluctantly. Lolita's 'very perfunctory underthings'[28] were an ineffective defence against Humbert's investigations on one occasion. The girl's shameless legshow induced her protectors more than once to rebuke her on the subject (*'ne montrez pas vos zhambes'*[29]). Once more the question arises: was it thoughtlessness or a coolly computed effect? Her liveliness was no doubt responsible for some of this licentiousness; but so was the incredible corporal heat that was part of her nymphet charm.[30]

[24] *Lolita,* p. 109. The blunt question of a saleswoman whether he intended to buy any slips he must have answered with a shaking of the head: 'Slips? No slips. Lo and I loathed slips.' Their objection to the most intimate garment was, of course, caused by entirely different reasons.

[25] *Lolita,* p. 110.

[26] *Lolita,* p. 150.

[27] *Lolita,* p. 66.

[28] *Lolita,* pp. 62–63.

[29] This expression was first used by Lolita's mother (*Lolita,* p. 46) and later jokingly by Humbert Humbert (*Lolita,* p. 191).

[30] This characteristic is alluded to persistently in the first part of *Lolita:* pp. 47, 50, 53, 57, 61, 63, 109, 115, 140 etc. It seems that at the beginning of Humbert's description of Lolita this warmth is stressed to give the fictional body as much life as possible. It is obvious, however, that near the end of the book much of this heat has cooled. In the course of the novel one notices a loss of 'emotional temperature', too. Lolita's cooling down is paralleled to some extent by a weakening of Humbert's desire for her (this process sets in on p. 168).

But Lolita was not the only Nabokovian maiden to succumb to heat and to make concessions to it. She and Ada are akin to each other in this respect, and the latter's indulgence in very informal dress is almost pathological. It is amusing to see that on the physical level things are very much the same in Lolita's America and on Ada's Antiterra.[31] The children's investigation of Ardis Manor took them to many secluded spots and ended in the attic one day. In the process of climbing various staircases Van managed to catch more and more exciting glimpses of Ada's legs. From the attic, Ada proposed to climb on the roof. When she was standing on a convenient trunk, opening the skylight and trying to wriggle through it, the boy perceived for the first time 'that the child was darkly flossed'[32] and this 'rustic nudity under her dress'[33] was the cause for much restlessness for him.

On Ada's twelfth birthday a big picnic was given; the girl was allowed to wear her *lolita,* 'a rather long, but very airy and ample, black skirt, with red poppies or peonis'.[34] Mlle Larivière was present when the girl dressed, and so was the narrator. Ada, still damp after her morning ablutions, started dressing with a girlish movement:

> 'She had stepped into it [her skirt] naked, while her legs were still damp and "piney" after a special rubbing with a washcloth (morning bath being unknown under Mlle Larivière's régime) and pulled it on with a brisk jiggle of the hips which provoked her governess's familiar rebuke: *mais ne te trémousse pas comme ça quand tu mets ta jupe! Une petite fille de bonne maison,* etc. *Per contra,* the omission of panties was ignored by Ida Larivière, a bosomy woman of great and repulsive beauty (in nothing but corset and gartered stockings at the moment) who was not above making secret concessions to the heat of the dog-days herself; but in tender Ada's case the practice had deprecable effects.'[35]

Ada's most sensitive part suffered from heat rash that day ('with all its accompaniment of sticky, itchy, not altogether unpleasurable sensations'[36]) and the cure she chose consisted in sitting in the airy shade

[31] Antiterra is a sibling planet of the earth; the inhabitants of it have no knowledge of the latter's existence. Names are taken from 'our' world, mixed into dazzling combinations and they thus echo the 'Doppelgänger planet' as in a science fiction novel.
[32] *Ada,* p. 52.
[33] Ibid.
[34] *Ada,* p. 65.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

of an apple tree in the park, 'straddling a cool limb'. Van found this procedure rather disgusting.

This apple tree was the scene of a fateful encounter a few days later. Ada and Van climbed it together; the girl was leading, knowing the tree better than he. Thus she was once more above him; her bare foot slipped and they both tumbled down in a heap, but they managed to cling to a lower branch and to each other. Van's head was trapped between her legs. He took the unexpected opportunity to kiss their inside, whereas she closed her knees on him to get some support. This absurd, embarrassing situation was further accentuated by his later allegation that he 'removed a silk thread of larva web from his lip'.[37] His remark that 'such negligence of attire was a form of hysteria'[38] was answered by Ada with the assertion that her governess 'had nothing against a hysterical little girl's not wearing pantalets during *l'ardeur de la canicule*'.[39] Van did not accept this explanation. His repartee was categorical: 'I refuse to share the ardor of your little canicule with an apple tree.'[40] This foretaste of knowledge did not lead to further intimacies immediately. Both children continued to write diaries instead. Van's refusal to share the contact of Ada's body was of no avail, however. Ada was soon seen straddling a cool piano stool while painting curious flowers: she was interbreeding some orchids on paper, a pastime which 'seemed almost morbid in so young a girl so nakedly dressed'.[41] The boy tried to get as near to her as possible without her noticing it. Whenever his prey moved he was able to proceed in his survey: 'Van, who had drawn up to her seat as close as he dared, could see down her sleek *ensellure* as far as her coccyx and inhale the warmth of her entire body.'[42]

Such soothing contacts had been counterbalanced by a rather painful accident for Ada. Near the end of her picnic Ada wanted to ride Van's scorchingly hot bicycle which he had left in the burning sun for hours: 'Ada mounted it, uttered a yelp of pain, almost fell off, googled, recovered—and the rear tire burst with a comic bang.'[43] This unpleasant incident was soon forgotten as it was time to go back. On the way home

[37] *Ada*, p. 78.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] *Ada*, p. 81.
[42] Ibid. Ada's flimsy loose frock was deeply cut out behind.
[43] *Ada*, p. 72.

the children and the governess took up their seats in the *calèche*. There was little room in it. Ada had to be placed on Van's hard knees which created another embarrassing situation for the two; the availability and heat of Ada's charms were once more the cause of intense excitement for the boy: 'In a trance of awkward delight he held her by the hips. Hot gouts of sun moved fast across her zebra stripes [on the jersey] and the backs of her bare arms and seemed to continue their journey through the tunnel of his own frame.'[44]

Much later, after a remarkable dinner[45], there was a final dispute about the subject of girls' underwear. The couple were outside in the park again. Van was displeased because Ada's legs had been exposed much too carelessly when she had cornered her dog who had been running wild with a slipper.

> '"You know", said Van, "I really think you should wear *something* underneath on formal occasions."
> "Your hands are cold. Why formal? You said yourself it was a family affair."
> "Even so. You were in peril whenever you bent or sprawled."
> "I never *sprawl!*"
> "I'm quite sure it's not hygienic, or perhaps it's a kind of jealousy on my part. Memoirs of a Happy Chair. Oh, my darling."
> "At least", whispered Ada, "it pays off now, doesn't it? Croquet room? *Ou comme ça?*"
> "*Comme ça,* for once", said Van.'[46]

Ada's availability is strangely stressed by herself in this case and her omission seems equivocal when seen retrospectively. This passage contains an allusion to a simplicity and naturalness in the lovers' relations that would usually remain more implicit. Another interesting point is the transition from eating to kissing, and to making love. This is a sequence that one meets quite often in fiction. The children's impatience betrays their eagerness to indulge in their main occupation which was only interrupted by the long separations. During one of these intervals Ada must have grown up and renounced her pernicious habit of going around with hardly anything on.

[44] *Ada,* p. 72.
[45] *Ada,* pp. 195–210.
[46] *Ada,* pp. 209–210.

Cincinnatus C., a former teacher in a kindergarten, was imprisoned in a castle for 'gnostic turpitude'[47]. He had to wait for a long time until he saw his stupid, sex-mad wife again (she twice got pregnant by other men); she explained her infidelities by the pathetic remark that 'it's such a small thing, and it is such a relief to a man'.[48] In vain Cincinnatus wrote letters to her and pleaded for an interview to see her again. She was only admitted when the prison-authorities deemed it fit. Her two visits[49] were probably only dreams. The first certainly was, when she came accompanied by the whole family, her new lover, and all the furniture. During both interviews it was impossible for Cincinnatus to discuss their problems with her. For their second meeting she came alone, but in what a state! Most of the following circumstances are cleverly hidden in the narrative by adroitly placed ellipses and insignificant chatter on the part of Marthe. Access had only been granted to her by the director of the prison after certain favours had been bestowed on him.

She entered Cincinnatus' cell with flushed cheeks, dishevelled hair and disarranged clothes, 'the tight bodice of her black velvet dress was heaving—and something did not fit right, and this made her appear lopsided, and she kept trying to straighten her dress, tugging at it, or very rapidly wriggling her hips, as if something underneath were wrong and uncomfortable'.[50] She put a plump, naked leg on a chair, snapped the garter and related how difficult it was to get permission: 'Of course, I had to agree to a little concession—the usual story' and 'He kept me for an hour, your director'.[51] Between a discussion of his case and the impending execution, she casually suggested matrimonial relations if the prison rules allowed it. (Incidentally, they did not): 'She glanced at the cot, then at the door. "I don't know what the rules are here," she said under her breath, "but if you need it badly, Cin-Cin, go ahead, only do it quickly."'[52] He declined, probably because he knew that he was being watched all the time. Shedding ample tears, mainly because of her own

[47] I. e. non-conformity with the norms of the fictive, totalitarian nightmare state in which Cincinnatus lived.

[48] *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 28.

[49] *Invitation to a Beheading*, chs. 9 and 18.

[50] *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 166. This is reminiscent of the 'vicious movement' in *Ada* (p. 65), quoted above, p. 87. ?

[51] *Invitation to a Beheading*, pp. 166–67.

[52] *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 168.

predicament, Marthe was, however, soon ready to follow another summons from the prison authorities. It was not the director this time. She promised to be back in five minutes, but it took three quarters of an hour and she repeated the procedure that we have seen before: 'She put one foot on the chair, snapped her garter, and, angrily readjusting the pleats below her waist, sat down at the table, precisely as she had been sitting before.'[53] The horror of the situation lies not so much in her ostentatious behaviour, but rather in the professional remarks she made under her breath afterwards: 'All for nothing' and 'Shouldn't try if you can't manage it.'[54]

Lolita was twice separated from her stepfather-lover; first when she was in the summer camp, then after her premeditated escape. On both occasions she caused Humbert deep despair. His consolations were the contemplation of garments she had left behind and later the writing of *Lolita*. After bidding her farewell with an ambiguous embrace ('that ivory-smooth, sliding sensation of her skin through the thin frock that I had worked up and down while I held her'[55]) Humbert Humbert went marauding in the girl's bedroom: 'I marched into her tumbled room, threw open the door of the closet and plunged into a heap of crumpled things that had touched her. There was particularly one pink texture, sleazy, torn, with a faintly acrid odor in the seam. I wrapped in it Humbert's huge engorged heart.'[56] Perhaps it was a good thing that our fetishist was disturbed by the maid and so he had to regain his self-control at once. Later we learn that while Lolita's mother—and Humbert's wife—was in church, he 'deceived her with one of Lolita's anklets'.[57]

Lolita's final desertion left Humbert a few happy memories and a number of relics which he kept for months: 'I cherished and adored, and stained with my kisses and merman tears, a pair of old sneakers, a boy's shirt she had worn, some ancient blue-jeans I found in the trunk compartment, a crumpled school cap such-like wanton treasures.'[58] Humbert realized that unless he wanted to go mad, he had to part with her sundry possessions and he mailed everything to a home for orphaned girls; he thus freed himself of objects which were more powerful than words.

[53] *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 170.
[54] Ibid.
[55] *Lolita*, p. 69.
[56] Ibid.
[57] *Lolita*, p. 83.
[58] *Lolita*, p. 257.

Hugh Person, the main character of *Transparent Things,* was an American who was very fond of touring Europe. In his twenties he had courted Mrs. Moore, thirty-eight years old and mother of a sixteen-year-old daughter. But he had been 'impotent with the first and not audacious enough with the second'.[59] This had remained his only adventure for some time.

Some years later he fell in love with Armande, who was of Russian descent and fond of hiking in the Swiss mountains. They met for the first time on a train in Switzerland. Hugh's entry in his diary that night still revealed his irresolution with regard to her: 'I have fallen in love with you but shall do nothing about it.'[60] He did, however, go to see her in her chalet in the mountains. But Armande was skiing with somebody else at the moment. Her mother entertained him during her absence. She showed him some albums with photographs displaying Armande. It was at this moment that Person lost his head completely, voyeur *malgré lui,* romanticizing what he saw. But he had to suffer for it cruelly.

Armande, three male frinds and Hugh often went on endless hikes up the mountains. Person invariably went last, foolishly and frustratedly trying to follow the younger and much better trained party. Fate managed, however, to eliminate his competitors. Among them was Jacques, Armande's lover at the time. They were all dropped because they had demanded her presence at a mass orgy which she categorically refused to attend.[61]—Coming back from a hike, delivered of the crowd of pretenders, Hugh wondered whether it was the right moment to snatch a kiss from her. But he decided to postpone it. His romantic image of her took a new direction when, still further down, they entered the fir forest. She proposed casually: 'And now one is going to make love. I know a nice mossy spot just behind those trees where we won't be disturbed, if you do it quickly.'[62] Hugh's feeling that he was entitled to certain preliminaries was overlooked. 'He was further dismayed by the ripped fabric of thick-knit black tights that she wore under her ski pants. She consented to pull them down only just as far as necessary. Nor did she let him kiss her, or caress her thighs.'[63] The beginning of his desire after she had wriggled against him unintentionally in the process of drawing

[59] *Transparent Things,* p. 17.
[60] *Transparent Things,* p. 28.
[61] *Transparent Things,* p. 53. 'She was ready to be ultramodern, socially and sexually, but this was offensive, and vulgar, and as old as Greece.'
[62] *Transparent Things,* p. 54.
[63] Ibid.

up her tights was also overlooked. The episode was concluded with her matter-of-fact remark: 'One will go home now.'[64]

Despite all this, they got married. No communication was possible between the two, their thoughts moved on entirely different levels. She was endowed with a vile temper, morbid *amour propre,* strange whims, and sexual oddities. Armande was a difficult person to live with and problems began already on their honeymoon and grew more serious back in New York, where the Persons lived. Their conjugal bliss was based on certain prerequisites, thought up by capricious Armande, who, in this respect, even had claims to an artistic imagination:

> 'Armande decreed they regularly make love around teatime, in the living room, as upon an imaginary stage, to the steady accompaniment of casual small talk, with both performers decently clothed, he wearing his best business suit and a polka-dotted tie, she a smart black dress closed at the throat. In concession to nature, undergarments could be parted, or even undone, but only very, very discreetly, without the least break in the elegant chit-chat: impatience was pronounced unseemly, exposure, monstrous.'[65]

Casualness with regard to intercourse is not a new feature here, but the need for elegant conversation during the act has a touch of originality. A variation of this arrangement consisted in an exhibitionistic set-up:

> 'In a sense he preferred the parlor setting to the even less normal decor of those rare occasions when she desired him to possess her in bed, well under the bedclothes, while she telephoned, gossiping with a female friend or hoaxing an unknown male.'[66]

Armande possessed a trait which Nabokov sees as essential to the novelist's disposition; she derived 'excitement from the contrast between the fictitious and the factual'.[67] Her joy was probably at a peak when the gulf between the bare animal facts and their forced, seemingly casual play was widest. And Hugh? His 'mediocre potency' would have failed him altogether, had not nature overcome artifice invariably at the end of their exertions and ecstasy distorted the face of his gossiping mate. How did he explain this state of affairs? 'For example, he told himself that she refused to strip because she was shy of her tiny pouting breasts and the scar of a ski accident along her thigh. Silly Person!'[68]

[64] *Transparent Things,* p. 54.
[65] *Transparent Things,* p. 65.
[66] *Transparent Things,* p. 66.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

2. Slippers

''T is doubtful that in all Russia you will find
Three pairs of shapely feminine feet.
Ah me, I long could not forget two little feet.'[69]

Tatiana's Feet—the Origin of a Theme

I should like to compare Pushkin and Nabokov on an apparently trivial subject here. Pretty feet and elegant footwear have received a great deal of attention from both authors. If it is a fact that Pushkin attached great importance to pretty feet, it is no less obvious that Nabokov parodies this usage very often. I hope to show that the most delicate footwear, the slipper, has a special significance in Nabokov's works. The starting-point for an understanding of these two related themes can be found in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. The narrator's attention is here mainly centred on the visible parts of the body, the ones that convention allowed ladies to display in those days: head, neck, hands, and feet—the rest was subject to much ardent speculation. The fact that Pushkin and his narrator found beautiful feet as interesting as a made-up face or a gloved hand is not surprising, and, as Nabokov emphasizes, should not be called '"foot-fetishism" by a modern student of the psychology of sex'.[70]

This dangerous subject, which gave rise to a long digression in *Eugene Onegin*[71], provoked a parallel diversion in Nabokov's commentary. This is the case when he looks for the owners of the charming feet, displayed on the shore and elsewhere in Pushkin's masterpiece.[72] He comes to the witty conclusion that 'one foot should be assigned to Ekaterina Raevski and the other to Elizaveta Vorontsov'. Both were Pushkin's mistresses at a certain time.

Pushkin was fond of caricaturing people in the margin of his manuscript of *Eugene Onegin*. One of these drawings represents these

[69] *APEO*, One, XXX.
[70] *VNEO*, ii, p. 117.
[71] *APEO*, One, XXX–XXXIV.
[72] *VNEO*, ii, pp. 120–35.

pretty feet, praised for their taste of luxury, their haughtiness, and fragility in the poem; they are completely personified, the part stands for the whole person. Pushkin's narrator reads a wealth of promises into a pair of feet:

> 'By prophesying to the gaze
> an unprized recompense,
> with token beauty it attracts the wilful
> swarm of desires.'[73]

Disillusionment with beautiful but unbending ladies is likened to the later disappointment over the unfulfilled promises of these feet:

> 'But 'tis enough extolling haughty ones
> with my loquacious lyre:
> they are not worth either the passions
> or songs by them inspired;
> the words and gaze of the said charmers
> are as deceptive as their little feet.'[74]

There is another instance of the theme in Pushkin's novel which links little feet and pseudo-erotic description; it is especially important for the following discussion. In Tatiana's 'dream-scene' we see what is probably the archetype of Nabokov's parodic treatments of the theme:

> 'Into the forest goes Tatiana; the bear follows
> now in the crumbly snow sticks fast
> a small wet shoe come off her charming foot.'[75]

In Russian 'shoe' can also mean 'slipper'; Nabokov uses the former meaning in his translation and the latter in his commentary to it. If it were a 'real' scene, Tatiana would hardly wear slippers because the snow lay knee-high. And in the preceding stanza she was helped over a brook by the bear, which would no doubt have resulted in her losing one, if not both her slippers. But in a dream these points are of no importance. 'Charming foot' is, however, unequivocal in any language. Nabokov comments the scene as follows: 'Pushkin describes with erotic tenderness

[73] *APEO*, One, XXXII.
[74] *APEO*, One, XXXIV.
[75] *APEO*, Five, XIV. Tatiana is the heroine of the novel. She was pining for Onegin to be her lover, but the fop did not heed her advances. She had a monstrous dream in which she was pursued by a bear.

Tatiana's losing her slipper in the snow of her dream.'[76] On the same page a whole list of reccurences of the 'foot-theme' is given.[77] This losing of a slipper is, in both similar and different ways, important in Nabokov's novels; it most often retains this quality of eroticism, foreshadowing seduction and love.

Cinderella's Slippers—the Evolution of the Theme

Nabokov made frequent use of the theme that was introduced above and he added entirely new and original functions to it: the slippers live as independent a life as the feet that Pushkin described. Nabokov's inventiveness in this respect resulted in a considerable extension of the artistic possibilities of this motif. Tatiana's lost slipper becomes the model for the ones that Nabokov's characters lose in turns. But Nabokov also alludes to the origin of the slipper theme, Perrault's fairy-tale 'Cinderella'[78]. Several girls are jokingly called 'Cinderella' in Nabokov's fiction.

Slippers are put to most extraordinary uses; they can define the owner's social standing, they are often worn outside instead of shoes; they are used as emblems for the beginning of love, and in Humbert's murderous dream a slipper is used as a weapon. The distinction must be

[76] *VNEO,* ii, p. 115. As Nabokov did later, Pushkin may have borrowed the idea for this theme from the fairy-tale 'Cinderella', originally written by Charles Perrault (1628–1703). One of the first English translators mistranslated 'pantoufle de ver' (=vair) as 'glass-shoe' instead of 'fur-slipper', a mistake that lived with many generations of readers. Pnin takes delight in correcting one of his guests with regard to this (*Pnin,* p. 132).

[77] There is also an explanation of the associations connected with 'little feet' in Russian and other languages: 'The associative sense of the Russian nozhki (conjuring up a pair of small, elegant, high-instepped, slender-ankled lady's feet) is a shade tenderer than the French *petits pieds;* it has not the stodginess of the English "foot", large or small, or the mawkishness of the German "Füsschen"' (*VNEO,* ii, p. 115).

[78] See above, note 76. Already the original fairy-tale has a scene with a vague erotic implication: the loss of Cinderella's slipper at the prince's ball. The prince fell in love with her but was only able to see her again after the lost object was found. The slippers were tokens which, when brought together, also made the prince and Cinderella a pair.

made between slippers on male and female feet. The former are usually a sign of comfort, illness, or complete dismay in facing the problems of the world. The latter often imply luxuriousness and coquetry. Some of Nabokov's women characters choose to wear slippers when they are otherwise completely nude. This is a last stage on the way to nakedness and making love, at the point where the slippers slip off for good.

Martha's red slippers are a leitmotiv in *King, Queen, Knave:* 'While visiting him, she would wear bed slippers with crimson pompons. This pair of slippers (his modest but considerable gift) our lovers kept in the lower drawer of the corner chest, for life not unfrequently imitates the French novelists.'[79] This situation gave rise to a 'sweet euphemism'. Franz asked timidly on one occasion: 'No pompons today?'[80] The slippers became emblematic for the two lovers, a signal like the winding up of the clock in *Tristram Shandy.*

In an absurdly comical situation the rivals Dreyer and Franz tried to push open the door to Franz's room behind which Martha was hiding without their knowledge: 'She slipped and lost a slipper.'[81] Martha is, of course, a totally inept personification of Cinderella or Tatiana. This is a first parodic perversion of the theme.

Before the trio went on a holiday, Martha had taken these slippers home and had put them in a trunk. Her last request before her unexpected death was once more emblematic and by a slip of the tongue she almost gave away her sweet secret to Dreyer: 'Darling, where did you put my emerald slippers—no, I mean earrings? I want them.'[82] The former are the lover's, the latter the husband's gift. As such, these ornaments make their respective appearances in the narrative like characters. They recur here and there and are mixed up in Martha's delirium as in a dream, while Martha prepares for the dance of death.

The Defence opens with a description of Luzhin's father, who was 'already smeared for the night with transparent cold cream, and with his suede-slippered evening gait padded back to his bedroom'.[83] This character is already fully defined and he will never enjoy the narrator's benevolence, nor the affection of his son, the future chess genius. When the boy's mother is portrayed, one notices 'the slightly skewed high heels

[79] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 89.
[80] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 113.
[81] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 183.
[82] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 223.
[83] *The Defence,* p. 11.

of her white slippers'[84]—those that she was wearing outdoors. This dangerous footwear may have been the cause of the following accident: 'One July day, she slipped on the veranda steps and sprained her foot . . .'[85] A beloved character would probobly have sported new slippers, or just simply slippers, and would not have fallen at all.

Much later, after the death of both his parents, Luzhin's fiancée collected his belongings from the hotel in which they had stayed before he was taken to hospital: 'When the valise and small trunk were full and locked, she looked once more into all the corners and retrieved from under the bed a pair of astonishingly old, torn laceless brown shoes that served Luzhin in place of bedroom slippers. Carefully she pushed them back under the bed.'[86] Luzhin's negligence for unimportant details, that is, for things unrelated to his chess-world, would not be tolerated any longer, since he was being looked after for the first time in his life. But Luzhin's chess-illness deteriorated to such a degree that he had to be taken to a sanatorium for a while. There he was seen strolling in the garden 'in new bedroom slippers made of soft leather'.[87] He thus reversed his habit of wearing shoes in the house but surely spoilt his inappropriate footwear outside. For all we know, this was the last pair of slippers that Luzhin possessed. They are displayed once more at the decisive moment when he grasped the mysterious parallels between his life and chess, when he felt a mate pressing on him and was desperately looking for an escape. He found it in the idea of committing suicide: 'He was in his dressing-gown and bedroom slippers (. . .) trembling excitement distorted his face (. . .). He clicked his teeth joyfully at his wife, then turned heavily in a circle, almost knocking the palm over, lost a slipper which slithered, like a live thing, into the dining-room, where some cocoa was steaming, and speedily went after it.'[88] Luzhin was pursued by chess-patterns as Tatiana was chased by the bear in her dream; he was doubly reminded of his childhood by the hot cocoa and somebody in the next room mentioning the aunt of his who had taught him the elementaries of chess. Luzhin's slipper made a most extraordinary move, it almost came alive and signalled clearly where to turn and what to do.

[84] *The Defence,* p. 45.
[85] Ibid.
[86] *The Defence,* p. 119.
[87] *The Defence,* p. 126.
[88] *The Defence,* pp. 166–67.

The only old things that Humbert Humbert tolerated about himself were ancient bedroom slippers. The object of his passion is seen in several pairs of slippers. Once the girl was in a strange position which allowed Humbert to enjoy her surreptitiously:

> 'Her legs twitched a little as they lay across my live lap; I stroked them; there she lolled in the right-hand corner, almost asprawl, Lola the bobby-soxer, devouring her immemorial fruit, singing through its juice, *losing her slipper,* rubbing the heel of her slipperless foot in its sloppy anklet, against the pile of old magazines heaped on my left on the sofa—and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty—between my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock.'[89]

Lolita is another very unlikely Cinderella. There is here, perhaps, the greatest distance between the original and the parody. Once more slippers are worn by the object of somebody's lust; the losing of slippers is the signal which indicates highly consequential moments in the narrative.

One of Humbert's innumerable gifts to Lolita must have been 'new slippers with pussy fur tops'.[90] This present was worn by a completely naked Lolita in the Enchanted Hunters hotel. It is surprising how the later change in the couple's relationship shows even in details such as slippers. When Humbert found Lolita again after having lost sight of her for a long time, she was much changed: taller, pregnant, pale, new hair-style, cheeks hollowed, wearing glasses, a plain dress, and 'sloppy felt slippers'.[91] Despite the ravages of time, Humbert was still in love with Lolita and he proposed to take her away from her young husband.

Humbert made the most astonishing use of a slipper in what he calls a 'day-mare'; in a bad dream where he sees himself killing Quilty, his nimble opponent in the competition for Lolita: 'A kind of momentary shift occurred as if I were in the connubial bedroom, and Charlotte were sick in bed. Quilty was a very sick man. I held one of his slippers instead of the pistol—I was sitting on the pistol.'[92] It is noteworthy here that in this dream the two 'obstacles' in Humbert's relations to Lolita, her mother and his rival, are interchanged, as are the two important objects, slipper and pistol.[93] It is also possible that Humbert mistook Quilty's

[89] *Lolita,* p. 61. Italics mine.
[90] *Lolita,* p. 140.
[91] *Lolita,* p. 271.
[92] *Lolita,* p. 306.
[93] This evokes the similar confusion which was discussed above, p. 97.

slipper for his own. The Doppelgänger-relationship between the two is very strong.[94]

Losing slippers is a recurrent theme as we have seen; its variations and 'transfigurations' make it sometimes difficult to see any connection with the origin of the myth at all. Charles Nicol has found a transfiguration of the Cinderella topic in *Pnin*.[95] He quite seriously discusses candidates for a male Cinderella.

Pnin was fond of spreading his erudition. He could not refrain from doing so even at his party. His impromptu speech was caused by a remark about his new punch-bowl which was, for a moment, the centre of attention:

> 'Margaret Thayer admired it in her turn, and said that when she was a child, she imagined Cinderella's glass shoes to be exactly of that greenish-blue tint; whereupon Professor Pnin remarked that, *primo,* he would like everybody to say if contents were as good as container, and, *secundo,* that Cendrillon's shoes were not made of glass but of Russian squirrel fur—*vair,* in French.'[96]

The popular etymology that follows here in the text leads to a discussion of the exact shade of bluish gray that is one of Nabokov's favourite hues; it is a tint that he very often attributed to the sky, to eyes etc. and which is defined as the colour of the winter squirrel.

In *Ada* we find once more a playful treatment of the slipper theme. The maid of the house was often referred to as 'Cinderella'. 'What was her name? Blanche—but Mlle Larivière called her "Cendrillon" because her stockings got so easily laddered, see, and because she broke and mislaid things, and confused flowers.'[97] Van, licentiously dressed, recklessly tried to grab her as soon as possible. But Cinderella escaped. She was four years his senior, a virgin, and indisposed on that day. But she could be seen again somewhat later, Cinderella-like, 'she rushed down the corridor and lost a miniver-trimmed slipper on the grand staircase, like Ashette in the English version'.[98] Van soon became entangled irrevocably in his long-lasting love-affair with Ada and he thus concentrated rather on *her* slippers.—After four years' separation she wore

[94] Cf. *Lolita,* p. 296: 'He swept by me in a purple bathrobe, very like the one I had.'
[95] Charles Nicol, 'Pnin's History', *Novel,* Spring 1971, p. 201.
[96] *Pnin,* p. 132. Cf. above p. 96, footnote 76.
[97] *Ada,* p. 44.
[98] *Ada,* p. 92.

'her bare insteps in glossy black Glass slippers'[99] which 'he found hard to distinguish from dance footwear'.[100]—Near the end of *Ada* he met the heroine again; she still wore glamorous slippers: 'He saw her bronze bob, her white neck and arms, the pale flowers on her flimsy peignoir, her high-heeled silver slippers.'[101]

We have seen that Nabokov uses the Cinderella-Tatiana myth as a springboard for his parodic usage of it. Slippers on female feet are a type of footwear that lends itself especially well to pseudo-erotic description. They are tantalizing objects, covering half the foot, but leaving free much of the ankle and instep. This is a part of the leg which can be very elegant with pretty women. The frequent use of the slipper theme in Nabokov's fiction can be explained by its function as an index (not as a symbol) and by the numerous artistic possibilities that are inherent in it. The author amuses himself and the reader with the delights of parody, perversion[102], and transfiguration of a well-known theme.

[99] *Ada*, p. 307.
[100] *Ada*, p. 327.
[101] *Ada*, p. 442.
[102] Ada, defending Blanche from Van's unjust imputations, uses the Cinderella story as an ambiguous simile in her banter and thus creates an impudent perversion of it: 'You see quite well they are dancing. It's like the Beast and the Belle at the ball where Cinderella loses her garter and the Prince his beautiful codpiece of glass' (*Ada*, pp. 315–16).

3. Hygiene: Shaves and Baths

It is natural for the theme of hygiene to give rise to recurrent situations which become almost stereotype; yet it has a functional importance in Nabokov's narratives and is not merely an attempt to include seemingly 'real' occupations to give life to flat characters. The problem of hygiene is normally seen in the perspective of the male and it is mainly male characters that are described during hygienic activities. The female's endeavours are mostly seen in the results. Baths, or ablutions, shaving, and the secrets of female coquetry (make-up, perfumes etc.) are the most important manifestations on the whole. One of the conditions for a love-affair between two characters is the meticulous observation of the rites of hygiene on both sides. All this beauty culture is a fight against death; sometimes it can be a pleasure, but more often it is dreary routine. It is the occasion of a first confrontation with the self and the environment in the morning, when the senses are either dazed or hypersensitive. The stimulus of a bath, the feeling of peace after a thorough shave, are the best frames of mind at the beginning of a day in Nabokov's fiction.

The bathroom has become a place of large-scale fictive action in Nabokov's novels. It is the mysterious place where a character prepares himself for the day or for the night; but it is also a hiding-place, a refuge for a persecuted individual, a working place for the artist who hates to waste time, or the inappropriate corner for a secret tryst. In some novels, Nabokov has even evolved an ethnographic evaluation of bathrooms. The degree of cleanliness is an infallible symptom of congenial or hostile surroundings. Many characters suffer when they have to put up with an unfamiliar bathroom. It is there that they become aware of the corporality of others who invade their area of intimacy by their negligence, by overlooking the repulsive traces of their doings.

The situation of the shaving male has been described with the repetitiveness intrinsic to the act in reality; its exasperating monotony causes the despair of many characters. Clumsy shavers or owners of difficult beards suffer more than others, of course. The function of these shaving scenes is quite different from the one at the beginning of *Ulysses,* where it is an accompanying theme of the dialogue.[1] Nabokov's males are entirely absorbed in their daily tussle; and therefore they are mostly

[1] James Joyce, *Ulysses,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 9–18.

alone, performing a sacred rite, trying to do their best in the 'pre-electric shaving era'. There is still a certain danger inherent in the act. Some characters succeed in cutting themselves despite the promised safety of a 'safety razor'.

It was Martin Edelweiss who perhaps explained the aim of hygiene best. His reflections are no doubt valid for other characters as well: 'Martin could not manage without his morning bath (in the sea, in a pond, in a shower, or in his tub), which represented, he thought, a kind of heroic defense: a defense against the obstinate attack of the earth advancing by means of a film of insidious dust, as if it could not wait to take possession of a man before his time.'[2] Hygiene is a ritual of conservation, of self-preservation; but cleanliness is, of course, also a means of preventing oneself from becoming a nuisance for the environment. Hygiene is often seen as a preliminary to work, love, or death. For some of Nabokov's artists the daily routine of sanitary occupations is combined with meditation, a combination by which their work profits to a great extent.

Nabokov himself is known to have a definite time-schedule for his working day. Hygiene and introspection have a fixed place and are said to precede his work: 'I awake around seven in winter (...). For a while I lie in bed mentally revising and planning things. Around eight: shave, breakfast, enthroned meditation, and bath—in that order. Then I work till lunch in my study, taking time out for a short stroll with my wife along the lake.'[3] Here, too, we find the sequence of bath followed by work, as with his fictive characters Adam Krug and John Shade. With them Nabokov shares the habit of creating while enjoying his bath; in the same interview Nabokov complained of the inconvenience of this method, providing a list of his failings as a writer at the same time: 'Lack of spontaneity; the nuisance of parallel thoughts; inability to express myself properly in any language unless I compose every damned sentence in my bath, in my mind, at my desk.'[4]

The fastidiousness peculiar to most of Nabokov's characters when entering a bathroom was passed on to them by an author who enjoyed luxurious facilities in his childhood. The amenities of his paternal homes were indeed very comfortable. For instance, they amounted to five bathrooms in the 'Château', the Nabokov's country estate, fifty miles south

[2] *Glory*, p. 182.
[3] *Strong Opinions*, p. 28.
[4] *Strong Opinions*, p. 34.

of St. Petersburg.[5] It is obvious that in his later exile, conditions did not always reach these standards. It is most likely that a writer who travelled as much as Nabokov had to get used to all sorts of provisional sanitary facilities and had often to overcome the shock of unfamiliar surroundings. Some of his characters have inherited these Proustian mechanisms. The feeling of nostalgia connected with luxurious baths, rubber tubs, ablutions, torrents of icy water, and swimming in rivers is evoked in many Nabokov novels, as well as in his autobiography. One of the comical elements in *Speak, Memory* is the series of nurses, governesses, and tutors with their oddities, and especially 'Mademoiselle'[6]. She belonged to the class of people who found one bath a week sufficient: 'Saturday night used to be or ought to have been a pleasurable prospect, because that was the night Mademoiselle, who belonged to the classical school of hygiene and regarded our *toquades anglaises* as merely a source of colds, indulged in the perilous luxury of a weekly bath, ...'[7] This venture allowed the young Nabokov to stay awake for a little longer which was a blessing since he affirms to have been an insomniac all his life; this is, incidentally, another quality which was passed on to many characters in his novels.

Shortcomings and Squeamishness

In many novels the reasons for antipathies are not named as openly and cruelly as in Nabokov's works. In his fictive world a deficiency on one side can prevent a possible relationship. But there is the other possi-

[5] 'There were five bathrooms in our country house, and a medley of venerable washstands (...). Regular baths were taken in the evening. For morning ablutions, the round, rubber English tubs were used. Mine was about four feet in diameter, with a knee-high rim. Upon the lathered back of the squatting child, a jugful of water was carefully poured by an aproned servant. Its temperature varied with the hydrotherapeutic notions of successive mentors. There was that bleak period of dawning puberty, when an icy deluge was decreed by our current tutor, who happened to be a medical student. On the other hand, the temperature of one's evening bath remained pleasantly constant at 28° Réaumur (95° Fahrenheit) as measured by a large kindly thermometer whose wooden sheathing (with a bit of damp string in the eye of the handle) allowed it to share in the buoyancy of celluloid goldfishes and little swans' (*Speak, Memory*, p. 67).

[6] A Swiss governess. Chapter five of *Speak, Memory* is entirely devoted to her.

[7] *Speak, Memory*, p. 86.

bility as well—lovers who teach each other how to please. Luzhin's fiancée had to start her lesson right at the beginning; she had to take care of everything.[8] And we know that at the outset Lolita limited her sanitary acts to brushing her teeth, but at least she performed that with real zest. A patient Humbert taught her to avoid dirty washrooms, to take regular showers, and to wash her hair more often. Thus she was made to conform better to his dream-like image of her. Provincial Franz had some difficulties in adjusting to the standards of the new circles he moved in; it was his fellow-worker who initiated him to a different attitude concerning his own body:

> 'Acting upon impeccable Piffke's delicately formulated suggestions, Franz acquired sybarite habits of personal hygiene. He now washed his feet at least twice a week and changed his starched collar and cuffs practically every day. Every evening he brushed his suit and shined his shoes. He used all sorts of nice lotions, smelling of spring flowers and Piffke. He hardly ever skipped his Saturday bath. He put on a clean shirt every Wednesday and Sunday. He made a point of changing his warm underwear at least once in ten days. How shocked his mother would be, he reflected, if she saw his laundry bills.'[9]

Nabokov is here making fun of provincial habits of hygiene in the Germany of the Twenties. One shudders to imagine how Franz lived before he was in Berlin. It was typical that the more a garment was hidden from sight, the less it was changed. Fyodor was apalled by the 'visibility of cleanliness—the gleam of saucepan bottoms in the kitchen and the barbaric filth of the bathrooms'.[10]

There is another character who mentally disapproves of the facilities made available to him in the house of his friends; he is professor Adam Krug, a philosopher and purist, exiled in his own, hostile country. When his wife died, he left the funeral, overcome by grief. Because the Lakes hotel was closed, he was put up at his friends', the Maximovs, where everything was perfect apart from the bathroom:

> 'The common bathroom in a friendly house is its only inhospitable section, especially when the water runs at first tepid, then stone cold. A long silvery hair was embedded in a cake of cheap almond soap. Toilet paper had been difficult to

[8] She was assisted by her mother who remarked to Luzhin one day: 'I dare say you don't wash often' (*The Defence*, p. 99).
[9] *King, Queen, Knave*, p. 71.
[10] *The Gift*, p. 83.

get lately and was replaced by bits of newspaper impaled on a hook. At the bottom of the bowl a safety razor blade envelope with Dr. S. Freud's face and signature floated. If I stay here for a week, he thought, this alien wood will be gradually tamed and purefied by repeated contacts with my weary flesh. He rinsed the bath gingerly. The rubber tube of the spraying affair came off the tap with a plop. Two clean towels hung on a rope together with some black stockings that had been, or would be, washed. A bottle of mineral oil, half full, and a gray cardboard cylinder which had been the kernel of a toilet paper roll, stood side by side on a shelf. The shelf also held two popular novels (*Flung Roses*[11] and *All Quiet on the Don*). David's toothbrush gave him a smile of recognition. He dropped his shaving soap on the floor and there was a silvery hair sticking to it when he picked it up.'[12]

The hostility or uneasiness when facing the unknown is quite Proustian here[13], although it manifests itself more on the concrete level. The contiguity of objects (towels—stockings, toilet roll—novels) acts strongly on the evaluation of the single objects and affects the appearance of the bathroom as a whole. Bad regulation of warm and cold water, badly cleaned bathtub, and obstinate hairs[14] are recurrent details in many Nabokov novels. The place attributed to the things here is of the utmost importance as well: the face of Freud is conspicuously put into the bowl of the toilet to suggest the contempt that Nabokov holds for a certain type of Freudian psychology.

Preliminaries and Pretexts

The preoccupation with hygiene often anticipates highly important moments in the narrative; and sometimes the supervening activities are already foreshadowed in the bathroom. Shaving presupposes a good deal of concentration, but bathing allows the mind to wander more freely. It is during this kind of meditation that perception is most acute and shortcomings of the sanitary conditions are particularly disturbing.

Ganin's preparations for the day, when he knew that he would see his long-lost love again, were meticulous and pleasant:

[11] The same book is read by a nurse later in the novel (*Bend Sinister*, p. 126).
[12] *Bend Sinister*, p. 77.
[13] Cf. Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, (Paris: Livre de poche, 1954), II, 250.
[14] Here the landlady's as we learn later (*Bend Sinister*, p. 84).

'Ganin felt that today he had become exactly nine years younger. Softened by flakes of lather, the bristles on his taut skin steadily crepitated as they fell to the little steel ploughshare of his safety razor. As he shaved Ganin moved his eyebrows and then, as he stood in the bathtub and doused his body in cold water from a jug, smiled with joy. He brushed his damp black hair, dressed quickly and went out.'[15]

But these occupations do not always pass so easily and instead of growing a day younger each morning, one might say that some shavers grow years older. For example Fyodor, for whom one morning 'the perspective of washing and shaving seemed as flat and impossible as the perspective of the early Italians'.[16] When he finally got up after a morning of reading poetry in bed, he felt rather miserable:

'A poetic hangover, dejection, the "sad animal" ... The day before he had forgotten to rinse his safety razor, between its teeth there was stony foam, the blade had rusted—and he had no other. A pale self-portrait looked out of the mirror with the serious eyes of all self-portraits. On a tenderly itchy spot to one side of his chin, among the hairs which had grown up overnight (how many yards of them shall I cut off in my life?), there had appeared a yellow-headed pimple which instantly became the hub of Fyodor's existence, a rallying point for all the unpleasant feelings now trekking in from different parts of his being. He squeezed it out—although he knew it would later swell up three times as big. How awful all this was. Through the cold shaving-soap foam pierced the little red eye: *L'oeil regardait Caïn.* Meanwhile the blade had no effect on the hairs, and the feel of the bristles when he checked them with his fingers produced a sense of hellish hopelessness. Drops of blood dew appeared in the vicinity of his Adam's apple but the hairs were still there. The Steppe of Despair.'[17]

Fyodor, too, was looking forward to seeing the woman he adored. He completed his sanitary tasks with an icy shower, made a mistake with the towels and thought miserably that he would be smelling of his landlady all day. The difficulty of his beard was hard to overcome with a blunt razor-blade but he had to leave it as it was as lunch was waiting.

In *Ada* Van is described as a most impatient lover. There is pratically no transition from hygienic to amorous pursuits and he actually bursts out of the bathroom, expecting to find Ada alone: 'Van sped up his ablutions, robustly dried himself, powdered his groin, and without bothering to put anything on re-entered the bedroom in full pride, only to find a tousled and sulky Lucette[18], still in her willow green nightie sitting on

[15] *Mary,* p. 28.
[16] *The Gift,* p. 152.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ada's sister who was also in love with Van.

the far end of the concubital bed.'[19] Understanding Lucette wanted to leave the couple to their devices ('*I* need a bath and *he* needs you'). But nothing of the sort in fact happened because 'fun in a triangle'—lover, beloved, and ungroomed Lucette—developed quite naturally. Lucette's offer to leave the lovers alone was well-meant here, but she had not always been so un-selfish. Much earlier in the novel, Ada and Van often had to take refuge from prying little sister, sometimes even in the bathroom:

> 'The two elder children, having locked the door of the L-shaped bathroom from the inside, now retired to the seclusion of its lateral part, in a corner between a chest of drawers and an old unused mangle, which the sea-green eye of the bathroom looking-glass could not reach; but barely had they finished their violent and uncomfortable exertions in that hidden nook, with an empty medicine bottle idiotically beating time on a shelf, when Lucette was already calling resonantly from the tub and the maid knocking on the door: Mlle Larivière wanted some hot water too. They tried all sorts of other tricks.'[20]

Some four stanzas in canto four of *Pale Fire* are dedicated to the picture of John Shade's bizarre hygienic habits. Shade tried to combine his daily activities as a parallel to Nabokov's idea that poetic vision consists in the power of seeing several things in the same moment. The termination of his poem, which happened to coincide with the end of his life, was close at hand. Thus shaving, bath, and meditation were indulged in simultaneously. Several stanzas are devoted to the difficulties of shaving.[21] After nine strokes with his old *Gillette,* there was 'one last

[19] *Ada,* p. 329.
[20] *Ada,* p. 116.
[21] Shade describes his preparations as follows:

> 'Since my biographer may be too staid
> Or know too little to affirm that Shade
> Shaved in his bath, here goes:
> "He'd fixed a sort
> Of hinge-and-screw affair, a steel support
> Running across the tub to hold in place
> The shaving mirror right before his face
> And with his toe renewing tap-warmth, he'd
> Sit like a king there, and like Marat bleed."'

(*Pale Fire,* p. 56).

Kinbote, Shade's future biographer-commentator-falsificator, witnessed the proceedings on one occasion. Shade's wife did not want to let him into the bathroom, but John roared: 'Let him in, Sybil, he won't rape me!' (*Pale Fire,* p. 208).

patch of prickliness', the tenth made a bloody spot of it, and the tortured shaver could but wonder at the dream-easy way with which people are seen to shave in TV commercials:

> 'I have my doubts about the one-armed bloke
> Who in commercials with one gliding stroke
> Clears a smooth path of flesh from ear to chin,
> Then wipes his face and fondly tries his skin.
> I'm in the class of fussy bimanists.
> As a discreet ephebe in tights assists
> A female in an acrobatic dance,
> My left hand helps, and holds, and shifts its stance.
> Now I shall speak . . . Better than any soap
> Is the sensation for which the poets hope
> When inspiration and its icy blaze,
> The sudden image, the immediate phrase
> Over the skin a triple ripple send
> Making the little hairs all stand on end
> As in the enlarged animated scheme
> Of whiskers mowed when held up by Our Cream.'[22]

Inspiration came during the bath and shave. The latter was even facilitated by it, if we believe Shade. The end of this 'shaving session in the bath' is preceded by a moment of wandering of the poet's imagination, starting from the geography of his face, grasping apparently unconnected events:

> 'And while the safety blade with scrape and screak
> Travels across the country of my cheek,
> Cars on the highway pass, and up the steep
> Incline big trucks around my cheekbone creep,
> And now a silent liner docks, and now
> Sunglassers tour Beirut, and now I plough
> Old Zembla's fields[23] where my gray stubble grows,
> And slaves make hay between my mouth and nose.'[24]

Such seemingly disparate subjects as shaving and imaginary journeys are woven into a system of interlaced metaphors, together with the unusual description of the narrator's face. These may be also images of Shade's modes of perception and reflection, or souvenirs that haunt him during

[22] *Pale Fire*, p. 56.
[23] Zembla is the imaginary country where Kinbote is supposed to have been king and from where he fled to America.
[24] *Pale Fire*, pp. 56–57.

his daily occupation. The flight of his imagination is checked, however, by the all-absorbing labour of shaving.

Hygiene does not only precede love or intellectual work, but also death, as, for instance, in the case of the poor false double in *Despair*. Hermann's plan was to make Felix[25] as perfectly alike to himself as possible by pretending to make preparations for a film scene; then he intended to kill him, dupe the insurance company, and cash his own life-insurance. Hygiene is here seen as an art of creating doubles, a means of producing an artistic likeness; this is, of course, a madman's plan.

The metamorphosis was to take place at the edge of a forest near Berlin. First Felix had to be shaved: 'I took off my overcoat so as to operate with more freedom. Felix was curiously examining the bright teeth of the safety razor and its silvery grip. Then he examined the shaving brush; put it to his cheek to test its softness; it was, indeed, delightfully fluffy: I had paid seventeen marks fifty for it. He was quite fascinated, too, by the tube of expensive shaving cream.'[26] Felix' whiskers had to be scraped off, his mustache trimmed, his eyebrows improved. Then he needed a change of clothes, a manicure, and a pedicure. In the end came the last touches and a bit of combing. The artistic feat—a double created from a tolerable likeness—became possible and real for Hermann, but the fraud was incapable of convincing anyone else.

[25] A tramp whom Hermann thought to be his double but who probably did not bear any resemblance to him at all, as nobody else saw the likeness after his death.

[26] *Despair*, p. 162.

4. 'The Marvellous Russian Foods'—and Their Substitutes

'O lecteur, ce dernier détail ne te fait-il pas venir l'eau à la bouche?'[27]

In the universe of Nabokov's novels the place and importance of food are what one would call 'normal' or 'traditional', that is, they are referred to about as frequently as in novels by other authors. The narrators and characters are, on the whole, not over-concerned with food—but then some are not indifferent to the appeal of good cooking either. The theme has various functions in the narrative. It may be a frame for a pleasant talk, it can be seen as an indirect means of characterization, or as indulgence in hedonistic sensuality, which manifests itself in rich description as a source of enjoyment (women and girls are gloated upon with similar delight as we have seen above). The description of food and table manners lends itself especially well to symbolism, too. Nabokov often indulges in this kind of sensualism parodically, but he denies any serious intentions, and condemns every critical approach going in that direction. Everyday meals are mostly described elliptically, mentioning one course (soup) and another (coffee). Greater importance is usually attached to the contacts, discussions, and thoughts occurring during these meals. More refined food is exposed with more detail and relished accordingly, by author, character, and reader. Eating and drinking provide the energy for the fictitious body and are converted into movement and warmth.

Nabokov's attitude to some aspects of this theme is expressed in his autobiography: 'Unfortunately I happen to have a morbid dislike for restaurants and cafés, especially Parisian ones—I detest crowds, harried waiters, Bohemians, vermouth concoctions, coffee, *zakuski*[28], floor shows and so forth. I like to eat and drink in a recumbent position (preferably on a couch) and in silence.'[29] Advocating this oriental position for gastronomical delectation seems rather strange, but his silence is quite in

[27] Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautréamont), *Les Chants de Maldoror,* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1973), p. 183.

[28] Snacks, hors d'œuvres, or a dessert.

[29] *Speak, Memory,* p. 219.

keeping with certain nineteenth century table manners, such as those of Balzac, for instance.[30]

In the early novels the fare was, of course, determined by the émigré situation in which most characters were placed: they had to put up with foreign cooking. Russian food is mentioned only rarely. The émigré communities were probably not in a position to acquire great quantities of imported food, or they lacked the chance to do so at all. One can easily imagine the feelings of an exiled upper class Russian who had to face the average unsophisticated cooking of Germany and who lived on 'Würstchen and Sauerkraut or cold pork'[31] and the like; or the retrospective shudders of Franz, whose mother used to prepare horrible dishes: 'Beer soup or bull hodes, or that local dainty Budenzucker.'[32]

Like Luzhin, who practically lived on chess, Fyodor, in *The Gift* hardly found the time to think about meals, being passionately concerned with poetry and also with chess: 'He bought some piroshki[33] (one with meat, another with cabbage, a third with tapioca, a fourth with rice, a fifth ... could not afford a fifth) in a Russian foodshop, which was a kind of wax museum of the old country's cuisine, and quickly finished them off on a damp bench in a small public garden.'[34] Indigence and lack of time both prevented a more detailed preoccupation with food. The snacks that Fyodor ate did not interfere with his daydreaming, nor with his re-creation of the past with the help of his own collection of juvenilia that he had written in Russia.

Fyodor was fortunate to be able to get Russian food at the place where he lived later as well, the family being compatriots; but he had to endure an impossible landlord there to have the opportunity to adore Zina, his stepdaughter. One day, after a bath and a shave[35], it was time for lunch:

'Soon afterwards he entered the dining-room. Marianna Nikolavna was ladling out the soup. He kissed her rough hand. Her daughter, who was just back from work, came to the table with slow steps, worn out and seemingly dazed by her office; she sat down with graceful languor—a cigarette in her long fingers, powder

[30] See Jean Paul Aron, *Le mangeur du XIXe siècle,* (Paris: Ed. Robert Laffont, 1973), pp. 321–25.
[31] As Ganin in *Mary.*
[32] *King, Queen, Knave,* p. 94.
[33] Some kind of ~~rolls.~~ pasties
[34] *The Gift,* p. 35.
[35] See above, p. 107.

on her lashes, a turquoise silk jumper, short-cut fair hair brushed back from the temple, sullenness, silence, ash. Shchyogolev gulped down a dram of vodka, tucked his napkin into his collar and began to slop up his soup, looking over his spoon affably but cautiously at his stepdaughter. She was slowly mixing a white exclamation mark of sour cream into her borshch, but then, shrugging her shoulders, she pushed her plate away.'[36]

As in real life, clashes between characters often happen at table and spoil the appetite of the lunchers. Shchyogolev's table manners make him join the hosts of unpleasant secondary characters. The situation is tense and it mirrors the difficult family life.—On the other hand, it is often conversation that distracts the attention that is due to the meals. This is the case during the rest of this meal. Shchyogolev launched on a extensive discussion of politics as he understood it:

'He talked all through the next two courses (goulash, kissel[37]) and after that, picking his teeth with a broken match, went to take a nap. Marianna Nikolavna busied herself with the dishes before doing the same. Her daughter, having not uttered a single word, went back to the office.'[38]

As usual, Fyodor had supper in his room, surrounded by his favourite occupations, literature and chess-problems, less troubled by the others here. The poor meal consisted mainly of the remains of earlier meals:

'Right at the very beginning of his stay in this flat Fyodor, supposing that he would need complete peace in the evenings, had reserved himself the right to have supper in his room. On the table among his books there now awaited him two grey sandwiches with a glossy mosaic of sausage, a cup of stale tea and a plate of pink kissel (from the morning). Chewing and sipping, he again opened *8×8*[39] (...) and began to enjoy quietly a study in which the few white pieces seemed to be hanging over an abyss and yet won the day.'[40]

The nastiness of the food did not interfere with the pleasure of solving chess-problems, the occupied eye hardly noticed the ugliness and unhealthiness of the stuff.

[36] *The Gift*, p. 153.
[37] A sweet pudding.
[38] *The Gift*, p. 155.
[39] *8×8* is the name of a chess magazine.
[40] *The Gift*, p. 168.

But quite as often food is gorged on in terms of visual description.[41] Martin Edelweiss, in *Glory,* was a student at Cambridge, where a tea-room was famous for its colourful pastry. He got into trouble when he extended his delight from the confectionary to the waitress serving these delectable dainties:

> 'Rose, the goddess of the tearoom, consented to go with him for a motor-car drive. In that shop, much frequented by students, you could buy pastry of every imaginable color: bright-red with speckles of cream that made them look like deadly amanitas; purplish-blue, like violet-scented soap; and glossy black, Negroid, with a white soul. One went on devouring cake after cake till one's innards got glued together, in the ever-present hope of at last discovering something really good.'[42]

Between two cups of chocolate at the tearoom, this short affair with Rose included a night spent at a distant inn together, a proposal from Martin upon hearing that she was pregnant, and a hasty retreat when he found out that the pregnancy was feigned.

Humbert Humbert's two wives were both only pretexts, but they served entirely different purposes. The first was meant to balance his restless life: 'It occurred to me that regular hours, home-cooked meals, all the conventions of marriage, the prophylactic routine of its bedroom activities and, who knows, the eventual flowering of certain morals values, of certain spiritual substitutes, might help me, if not to purge myself of my degrading and dangerous desires, at least to keep them under pacific control.'[43] But none of these ideas was going to be realized, and the couple had most of their meals at a restaurant.

[41] Cf. below in the discussion of *Ada,* where the most luxurious dishes are presented with a wealth of description, reminding one of Gogol. He rhetorically refused to describe a sumptuous menu in 'How Ivan Ivanovich Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovich', but then he succumbed to the appeal of gastronomic splendour nevertheless: 'I shall not attempt to describe all these courses. I will remain silent about the dumplings and cream, and the giblets served with the borshch, and the turkey with plums and raisins, or the dish that closely resembled a pair of boots soaked in kvass, and the sauce, the swan song of the old-fashioned chef (. . .) I shall not describe these dishes because I prefer eating them to expatiating about them . . .'.

[42] *Glory,* p. 102. Nabokov sees and describes colours with great accuracy, often using compound words and complex metaphors to convey the exact shade.

[43] *Lolita,* p. 26.

His second wife's schemes followed the conventional way to Humbert's heart. She cooked cakes for him and tried out special recipes to impress her lodger and future husband: 'The table was laid with more elegance than usual: candlelight, if you please. In this mawkish aura, Mrs. Haze gently touched the silver on both sides of her plate as if touching piano keys, and smiled down on her empty plate (was on a diet), and said she hoped I liked the salad (recipe lifted from a woman's magazine). She hoped I liked the cold cuts, too.'[44]

Untidy Lolita is announced in the narrative, before she actually appears, by the remains of the food and the garments she left scattered in the house: a brown applecore on the fireplace, then a white sock in the dining-room (hastily picked up by the furious mamma), and at last 'the still glistening stone of a plum in the fruit vase'.[45] Lolita's passion for fruit was only inferior to that for ice-cream.

Much later Lolita found it easier to confess the goings-on in the holiday camp while eating a good deal: 'She told me the way she had been debauched. We ate flavourless mealy bananas, bruised peaches and very palatable potato chips, and *die Kleine* told me everything.'[46] Greedy Lolita was, of course, infatuated with the rich 'teenager food' available in the United States of 'hotdog stands, corner drugstores, malts and cokes'.[47] Mentally Humbert thought her to be 'a disgustingly conventional girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth—these were the obvious items on her list of beloved things.'[48] Furthermore she enjoyed lollipops, chewing gum, popcorn, and candy whenever she could.

To humour his extravagant and sometimes very nasty pet on their two long travels across America Humbert built up a whole system of gifts and bonuses consisting of food, clothes, and various amusements. Sometimes the presents were the result of downright blackmail on the side of Lolita, or then a stimulant for her to grant yet another caress to her protector, or just a means of keeping her in a tolerable mood. Very often it was Lolita who chose a place to stop or a motel from the travel-book,

[44] *Lolita,* p. 65.
[45] *Lolita,* pp. 39–41.
[46] *Lolita,* p. 137.
[47] *Lolita,* p. 179.
[48] *Lolita,* p. 150.

'following the scent of rich food ads', such as
'Between meals snacks, outdoor barbecues'
'Complementary morning coffee and circulating ice water'
'Unlimited quantities of M-m-m food'
'Raid-the-icebox midnight snacks'[49]

All kinds of sundaes were Lolita's favourite dainties[50], and Humbert treated her to whatever she ordered. This is what she chose on one occasion: 'An elaborate icecream concoction topped with synthetic syrup. It was erected and brought her by a pimply brute of a boy who eyed my fragile child with carnal deliberation.'[51] The two very important points that are made here are: Humbert is an easy prey for jealousy and as squeamish with regard to food as to hygiene. He was concerned about Lolita's health earlier in the novel, too. We must take his word for his sanitary theories: 'Sundaes cause acne. The excess of the oily substances called sebum which nourishes the hair follicles of the skin creates, when too profuse, an irritation that opens the way to infection. But nymphets do not have acne although they gorge themselves on rich food.'[52] Here, as above, we notice Humbert's indefatigable delight in, and his concern about, Lolita's pure complexion and his almost morbid fear of impure contacts for her. What may be implied is that the nymphet's gastric system ('her lovely prismatic entrails') absorbed rich food much easier than that of a more innocent girl, Lolita being more energetic. But then the two points could be quite unrelated, a generalization made from the one case that Humbert knew in detail and 'nymphets do not have acne' could have been a mere sigh of relief.

Pnin had always been too much involved in his research to be a great gastronome and the 'alimentary landscape' of America did not offer him much choice. He misinterpreted one of his heart attacks as the consequence of something that he had eaten ('That pickle with ham?') On his preposterous trip to Cremona, where he had to deliver a speech, he only found time for a very poor dinner because he had grossly miscalculated the time that was at his disposal. He had 'a fruit cocktail to

[49] *Lolita*, pp. 149–50.
[50] Already Humbert's first love, Annabelle, was seen when enjoying a chocolat glacé (*Lolita*, p. 15).
[51] *Lolita*, p. 117.
[52] *Lolita*, p. 43.

begin with, mint jelly with the anonymous meat course, chocolate syrup with the vanilla ice cream'.[53] It is characteristic that the covering sauce is mentioned first, both on the meat and on the dessert; this is a merciful gesture of the narrator, but it would have been better if both courses had remained totally anonymous. Out of sheer sympathy with failure, Pnin used to patronize a restaurant called 'The Egg and We' in the town where he lived. But this attitude was to his disadvantage as we shall see below.

Pnin's squeamishness concerning bathrooms is paralleled by a similar nausea when he is supposed to use badly cleaned plates or silverware. When he was still new in the house, he burst into a party that his landlord was giving, with these insulting remarks: 'This is not a clean glass in the bathroom, and there exist other troubles.'[54] He was introduced to the guests, his glass was replaced by one filled with whisky, and the landlady offered him some olives. At the end of the party she gave him the clean glass for which he had asked.

When Victor came to see Pnin, they had a late meal in the restaurant alluded to above. The food is only presented between affable Pnin's gushes of speech. At the outset he recommended that they should wipe their knives and forks because they did not seem to be quite clean to him. They both had veal cutlets; Pnin remarked that 'it is naturally a concession to America, my new country, wonderful America which sometimes surprises me but always provokes my respect'.[55] The dessert was even a bigger concession, Pnin's second vanilla ice: 'In silence he ate his vanilla ice cream, which contained no vanilla and was not made of cream.'[56] Artificial food seems to be the norm: synthetic syrup on Lolita's sundae and a completely synthetic ice cream for Pnin.

The delights of the Russian or French cuisine are only rarely produced in Pnin's America. Pnin was considerably elated on one such occasion, a gathering of Russian émigré friends in a country-seat. Dinner was started with a Russian soup, 'red *botvinia* (chilled beet soup), wherein pink ice cubes tinkled'.[57] The rest of the meal remained undescribed. Activities between the meals included a game of croquet which Pnin won with

[53] *Pnin*, p. 22.
[54] *Pnin*, p. 30.
[55] *Pnin*, p. 87.
[56] *Pnin*, p. 88.
[57] *Pnin*, p. 108.

childish zeal, a swim in a nearby stream, and various discussions. The announcement that tea[58] was ready made Pnin recall a similar evening in Russia long ago. His father and the family doctor had been in the middle of a game of chess when their tea was served. The attention of these two men was so exclusively with their game that the tea things caused havoc in their moves: 'Dr. Belochkin's blind hand took a pretzel; Dr. Pnin's seeing hand took a rook. Dr. Belochkin munched and stared at the hole in his ranks; Dr. Pnin dipped an abstract zwieback into the hole of his tea.'[59] The interpenetration of chess moves and the movements serving the process of alimentation is complex and it achieves several purposes at once. The first player's moment of inattention results in his loss of a rook. The second player's delight over his advantage is lessened by his finding no tea with his probing zwieback and the prospect of having to pour tea is unpleasant because this will give his opponent a slight advantage. The whole passage is a fine example of how the most trivial subjects are structured and related minutely in Nabokov's prose.

This émigré meeting also included the children of the guests; they were 'healthy, tall, indolent, difficult American children of college age, with no sense of nature, and no Russian and no interest whatsoever in the niceties of their parents' backgrounds and pasts'.[60] Communication was impossible between the two generations and one is vaguely reminded of Lolita's tastes when one learns of the youngsters' 'preferring any Onkwedo[61] store product, any sort of canned goods to the marvelous Russian foods provided by the Kukolnikov household at loud, long dinners on the screened porch'.[62] There was no way to humour them. They preferred to listen to the radio all day and to go around in pairs.

In *Ada* finally we find a more pretentious cuisine than in the preceding novels. Demon Veen calls it 'well-meant but not quite first-rate food' to himself, but dandies are hard to please. The hors d'oeuvre was splendid; the competition between the Russian and French cuisine

[58] Russian tea included tea from a samovar, curd and whey, strawberries, jams, and various biscuits, wafers, pretzels and zwiebacks. Cf. *Pnin*, pp. 110–11.
[59] *Pnin*, p. 111.
[60] *Pnin*, pp. 98–99.
[61] A fictive town near the country seat where the meeting took place.
[62] *Pnin*, p. 99.

produced an orgy of titbits. For once, these appetizers are not described during the process of eating, but as they were first seen by the guests:

'A side table supported, also in the Russian fashion, a collection of red, black, gray, beige hors d'oeuvres, with the serviette caviar *(salfetochnaya ikra)* separated from the pot of Graybead *(ikra svezhaya)* by the succulent pomp of preserved boletes, "white", and "subbetuline", while the pink of smoked salmon vied with the incarnadine of Westphalian ham. The variously flavored *vodochki*[63] glittered on a separate tray. The French cuisine had contributed its *chaudfroids* and *foie gras*.'[64]

It is often in the field of gastronomy that Nabokov gives both the Russian and English names for the dishes. This is necessary because these dainties are probably as utterly alien to the palate of the reader as the Russian denominations are to his eyes.

Demon Veen was ruminating on the past, recalling similar occasions; only the food had remained more or less the same: 'God knows, the triple staple to start with was always much the same—pickled young boletes in their tight-fitting glossy fawn helmets, the gray beads of fresh caviar, the goose liver paste, piqueaced with Perigord truffles.'[65] Later, smoking between the courses, the dandy dispatched one more appetizer before going in to dinner with Marina: 'Demon popped into his mouth a last morsel of black bread with elastic samlet, gulped down a last pony of vodka and took his place at the table with Marina facing him across its oblong length, beyond the great bronze bowl with carved-looking Calville apples and elongated Persty grapes.'[66]

Marina was the hostess, Demon Veen the guest of honour at the family reunion of the Veens. The two were united by sweet but faded memories. Ada and Van Veen were also present. Russian cooking was predominant here:

'Tonight she contented herself with the automatic ceremony of giving him what she remembered, more or less correctly, when planning the menu, as being his favorite food—*zelyonïya shchi,* a velvety green sorrel-and-spinach soup, containing slippery hard-boiled eggs and served with finger-burning, irresistably soft, meat-filled or carrot-filled or cabbage-filled *pirozhki*—peer-rush-KEY, thus pronounced, thus celebrated here, for ever and ever. After that, she had decided, there would

[63] The diminutive plural of 'vodka'.
[64] *Ada,* pp. 196–97.
[65] *Ada,* p. 198.
[66] Ibid.

be bread-crumbed sander *(sudak)* with boiled potatoes, hazel-hen *(ryabchiki)* and that special asparagus *(bezukhanka)* which does not produce Proust's After-effect, as cookbooks say.'[67]

Demon, a perfect gentleman, would never criticize the menu or wines, but he did not like the servants. He complained that one of them looked as if he wanted 'to octopus the food he serves'.[68] Moreover he panted from shortness of breath; so much so, that it made Demon's soup ripple, an act which would have been a consequential insult in a restaurant. The dinner was pleasantly accompanied by the refreshing of memories, the telling of news, by word-play and banter. It was the wines finally that made Demon forget the little gastronomical deficiencies of the meal: burgundy and 'Lord Byron's Hock'[69]; but here, too, Marina blundered slightly because the connoisseur would have preferred champagne with *gelinotte* (hazelhen) which was surrounded by lingonberries. Gluttonous Ada asked for another helping of the fowl and modified the repast on her own accord. Even the way in which she ate betrayed something of the complicated family life of the Veens and Durmanovs: '... after a brief consultation with Bouteillan[70] a somewhat incongruous but highly palatable bit of saucisson d'Arles added itself to the young lady's fare of *asperges en branches* that everybody was now enjoying. It almost awed one to see the pleasure with which she and Demon distorted their shiny-lipped mouths in exactly the same way ...'[71] Once more the reader must be careful here. Saucisson and asparagus belong to the order of things that can be too obviously used parodically; as such 'symbols' are frequently manipulated by hack Freudian psychologists, certain novelists and critics, this is a beneficial counter-movement.

[67] *Ada*, p. 200.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Hockamore (Hochheimer), a German white Rhine wine which Byron drank for a change or when he could not get any claret.
[70] The housekeeper and butler of Ardis Manor.
[71] *Ada*, p. 204.

Conclusion

'That ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia'[72]

I hope that my method may have indicated some kind of practical procedure for an alternative type of critical evaluation of Nabokov's work. The differences to a more abstract discussion are obvious. First of all it was necessary to make the author's principles my own; but this alone would not have led very far in Nabokov's strange universe. The concept of the fictive body as the author's creation has revealed an underlying system which is more than a theme in Nabokov's prose. The body is a system of references relating the ego to the outside world. It is the domain of the individual's possibilities and it is what the circumstances make it, but it is above all defined by the quantity of information that the narrator allows us to share. The body is like a book in which the other characters and the reader are supposed to read and to interpret.

It is these bodies that provide stability to the works that have been discussed above. Many of Nabokov's compositions lack most of the conventional means of achieving unity in a work of art: the traditional concepts of space and time (of, for instance, ninetheenth century realist novels) and the continuity of tone. All this has been abandoned by Nabokov as by many other artists. Nabokov's frequent parodies, transformations, and perversions of literary forms and his other authorial devices are additional elements that are meant to break up the orthodox patterns.

We have seen that the bodies give life to the novel in which they appear. But there are different degrees of 'presence of the body', by which most beings in Nabokov's fiction may be characterized. From the supreme presence, which is love, to the total absence, which is death, there are many ways in which the characters may materialize.

Mary is an example of a character's body being totally absent from the book; her memory alone lives on so strongly as to inspire the whole novel. Mrs Luzhin is only partially present, only an absolute minimum is embodied. Her husband's body has many characteristics of a chess-figure. *The Eye* experiments with the different impressions that a character makes on others. Felix, Hermann's Doppelgänger, is a 'mock-presence' in *Despair*. He inspired Hermann to an 'ideal' crime that was

[72] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1966/1971), p. 120.

based on the assumed resemblance of the two persons. The plan failed because there was no likeness at all. In *Laughter in the Dark* we find a helpless body (Albinus became blind after his accident); he was the plaything of a wicked mistress and her evil lover. *Invitation to a Beheading* makes us follow the destiny of imprisoned Cincinnatus C. who, in the end, triumphs over the 'surrealism' of his surroundings. *The Gift* shows the obliteration of the artist's body from the narrative. Fyodor lives above all in his mind and memory. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the narrator's half-brother is entombed by a bad and malevolent biography (as in the Poe-Griswold case) and the narrator's task is one of resurrection. *Pnin* is about a displaced person's tribulations in a cheerless or frankly hostile environment. *Lolita* is the apotheosis of a girl's body and the story of Humbert's disillusionment and despair which were caused by her lack of innocence and her unwillingness to continue their relationship. Lolita had to undergo an exorcism and if we examine her last portrait[73] we may say that the methods of Humbert the Exorcist were a success, even if he did not see it in this way. *Pale Fire* consists of a poem that lives instead of John Shade, who was murdered by accident as soon as he had finished it, and of Kinbote's idiotic commentary, which is completely unnecessary for an understanding of the poem, but rather expounds his own ideas. *Ada* is again a memoir of a beloved body; it is all memory, an account of the couple's ardent love that started early, was often interrupted, and yet lived to the end of their lives.[74]

It is evident that Nabokov is interested in extreme conditions of the body and mind of his characters, in the maladjustments resulting from exile, in the difficulties that are created by a person's absence, and in the excesses of love and mental work. To my mind, these are the main themes that served as a basis for the author's creation of myths.

Thus, the concept of the body can be made to express the unity of the various novels and with this method it is possible to point to the extent of Nabokov's prose as a whole. To demonstrate this cohesion in a different way than was done before has been one of the aims of this study.

[73] *Lolita*, pp. 271 ff.

[74] In a similar way it could be shown that there is an equally wide range of presence for the narrators. There are omniscient narrators as in *Glory* or in *The Gift;* there is *Pnin,* where a narrator, who is first anonymous, becomes a character in the course of the novel. Many critics see him as a persona of the author. There are *Lolita* and *Ada* in which the main characters are also the narrators.

By creating his ever memorable characters, Nabokov managed to become immortal in the shape of his products. It is to be hoped that the mystery of the body, as Nabokov conceives it, has remained intact, so that the reader may explore it further for himself.

List of Main Characters in Nabokov's Novels

Mary:	Ganin, Mary (Mashenka), Alfyorov
King, Queen, Knave:	Franz Bubendorf, Martha and Franz Dreyer
The Defence:	Luzhin, his fiancée and later wife, Luzhin's father and mother
The Eye:	Smurov (I), Vanya and Evgenia
Glory:	Martin Edelweiss, Rose, Sonia
Laughter in the Dark:	Albinus Kretschmar, Margot Peters, Axel Rex, Udo Conrad
Despair:	Hermann, Lydia (his wife), Felix, Orlovius
Invitation to a Beheading:	Cincinnatus C., Marthe (his wife), M'sieur Pierre
The Gift:	Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, Zina Mertz, Marianna Nikolavna Mertz, Shchyogolev
The Real Life of Sebastian Knight:	Sebastian Knight, his half-brother, biographer of the former and narrator of the book, Mr. Goodman
Bend Sinister:	Adam Krug, David (his son), Olga (his dead wife), Paduk, Mariette
Pnin:	Professor Timofey Pavlovich Pnin, Liza Wind (née Bogolepov, ex Mrs. Pnin), Eric Wind (her second husband), Victor Wind (their difficult son)
Lolita:	Humbert Humbert, Annabel (his first love), Lolita, Valeria (his first wife), Charlotte Haze (his second wife), Clare Quilty (his opponent in the competition for Lolita's love)

Pale Fire:	John Shade (author of the poem), John Kinbote (writer of the ridiculous commentary to it), Gradus (Shade's killer)
Ada:	Ada (Adelaida) Durmanov, Lucette (her sister), Van (Ivan) Veen. For the rest of the family see the family tree at the beginning of the novel, and chapter one, where the ancestors are presented.
Transparent Things:	Hugh Person, Armande Chamar

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Curriculum Vitae

Born in Winterthur on the 26th February 1948, I attended the primary and secondary schools in this town. I continued my education in the Lehramtsschule (Kantonsschule Winterthur), which school I left in the autumn of 1967.

Immediately afterwards I commenced my studies of the English and French languages and literatures at Zürich University, which were only interrupted in 1970–71, when I spent a year in Guildford/Surrey as a 'Swiss Assistant' exchange teacher. Since 1972 I have been living in Richterswil, where I married in 1973 and where this thesis was written.

Since 1972 I have been teaching at the Kantonsschule in Pfäffikon in the Canton of Schwyz. I took my doctor's degree on the 23rd May 1975 at the University of Zürich.